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Fighting the good fight...

Outside my office window the sky is a magnificent spectacle of colors I don't know if I've ever seen before, as the sun sets against a mushroom cloud of smoke and fire. I can't help but imagine what the fire fighters are going through as they fight one of Los Angeles County's biggest blazes in history—a devastation zone so dramatic it can be seen as far away as Denver. Look up the photos taken from space and stare in awe. Nature is an uncompromising beast.

This may be the letter from the editor for a video game magazine, but there are times when a little deviation from the norm feels right. Today I salute the awesome firefighters who are out there risking their lives, doing everything they can to put an end to nature's march through my local camping escape—and the homes and lives of thousands of others whose fears right now I can't imagine.

One of video game's greatest gifts is the chance to assume the role of a character or situation that would normally be no more than a subtle daydream for the imagination. And often that role takes on some of the most violent and vulnerable components of the real world. Take *Real Heroes: Firefighters* for example, a newly released game that puts you in the heroic boots of a cadet learning the ropes of his dangerous profession, shown through the immersing first-person perspective as you put out fires and rescue trapped victims.

Playing *Real Heroes: Firefighters* had an unusually strong

effect on me, partly because of the rare backdrop of a mirrored real-world disaster close to me as I played, partly because the game felt a little new. This industry thrives on anything but new, and it's becoming increasingly satisfying simply to experience a game world that breaks the rigid rules.

This is not a review of *Firefighters*, a lower-budget, tiny-team labor of love that takes a very specific gamer to appreciate. It's a springboard for thought: how many of you play a game more for its theme than anything else, putting up with all the things games tend to get wrong for the chance to live that personal daydream that lives in our selective little corner of life?

Being a firefighter is not a job I would ever do, and it's not a job I can even begin to relate to as I sit here, in my 72-degree, music-filled room with a safe view. We like to play games that depict death and destruction, and that's perfectly OK. I do want to experience something that's larger than me, that takes me on a primal quest to defeat an onslaught of evil. Will the interactive world of 3D be that next step in drawing as that much closer to what it actually would be like to be in that fire, to fight that war, to rescue that poor princess?

Sony just announced that the PS3 will soon output all games in 3D. Get yourself one of the slick new HD televisions coming out next year and the new next-generation of gaming is yours. Time will tell if gimmick gives

way to real impact.

This month we dabble in a little 3D ourselves, creating a three-page layout you can view with the glasses located off page 16; here you can read about the making of the XBLA 3D kung-fu game *Invincible Tiger: The Legend of Han Tao*. Are creators like *Avalon* director James Cameron onto something when they say the future is in the third dimension?

I wish I could also say: now go check out our feature on the perils of storytelling too! But unfortunately my excitement last month in promising a Play roundtable on what should be a hot topic ended up needing a little more percolation time. I will leave you with this in-the-making teaser art above...

Till next month!

~Brady Fiechter

Story: Coming next month...



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Design

Art Director **Michael Hobbs**
 Associate Art Director **Chin "Nelson" Lui**
 Chief Illustrator **Robert Duenas**

Advertising and Sales

Director of Advertising & Promotions
Bethany Bell
 bethany.bell@fusionpublishing.net
 818.470.3754
 Account Manager
Daniel Marsowicz
 daniel.marsowicz@fusionpublishing.net
 818.857.8119
 Executive Director, Integrated Marketing
Shawn Sanders
 shawn.sanders@fusionpublishing.net

play magazine online

Online Content Manager
Eric L. Patterson
 webmaster@fusionpublishing.net

Corporate

Director Of Operations
Julie Halverson
 julie.halverson@fusionpublishing.net
 818.707.7786 x 104
 Advertising and Marketing Coordinator
Daniel Campisi
 daniel.campisi@fusionpublishing.net
 818.707.7786 x 106

Office Manager

Nancy Burns
 nancy.burns@fusionpublishing.net
 818.707.7786 x 109

Subscriptions and Customer Service

(in U.S.) **800.694.6506**
 (outside U.S.) 818.487.2036
 email: play@pubservice.com

play magazine Offices

Fusion Publishing, Inc.
 29219 Canwood St., Suite 100
 Agoura Hills, Ca 91301
 Tel 818.707.7786 Fax 818.707.7212

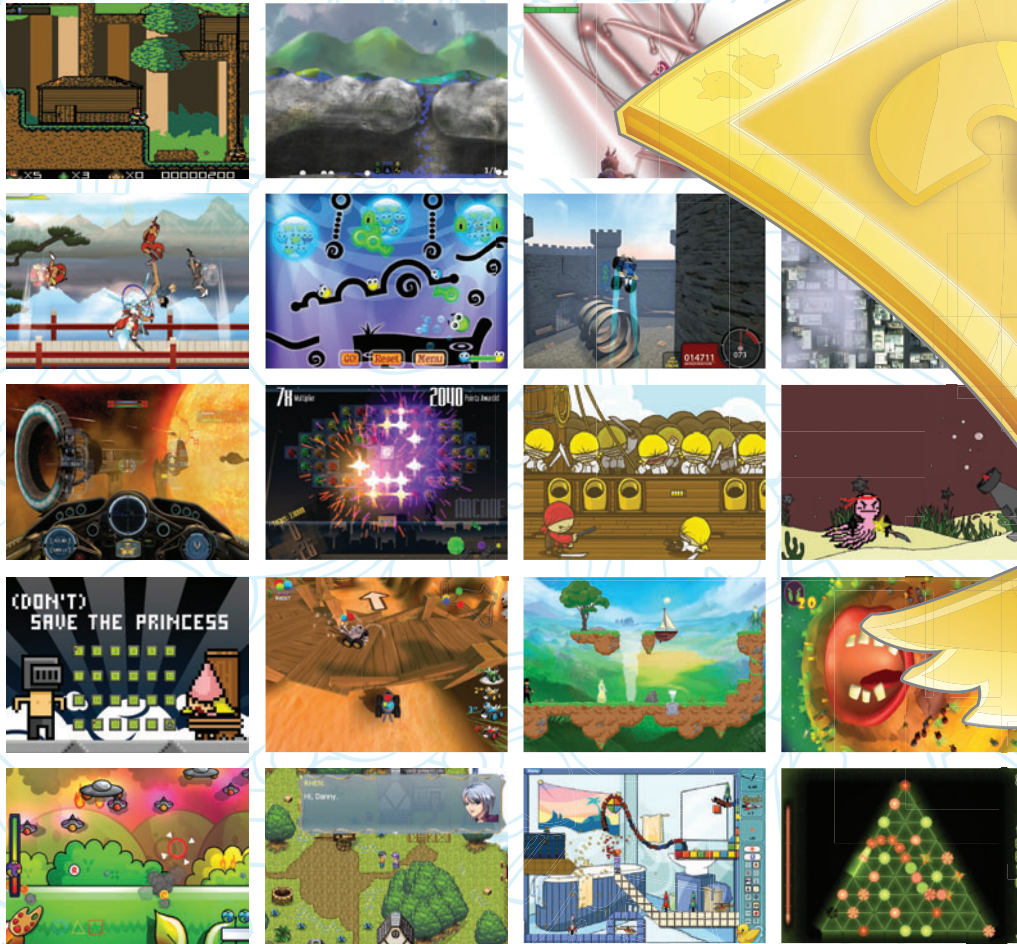
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October 2009

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056

Your choices are endless.
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Tale of Tales teams up with Silent Hill character designer

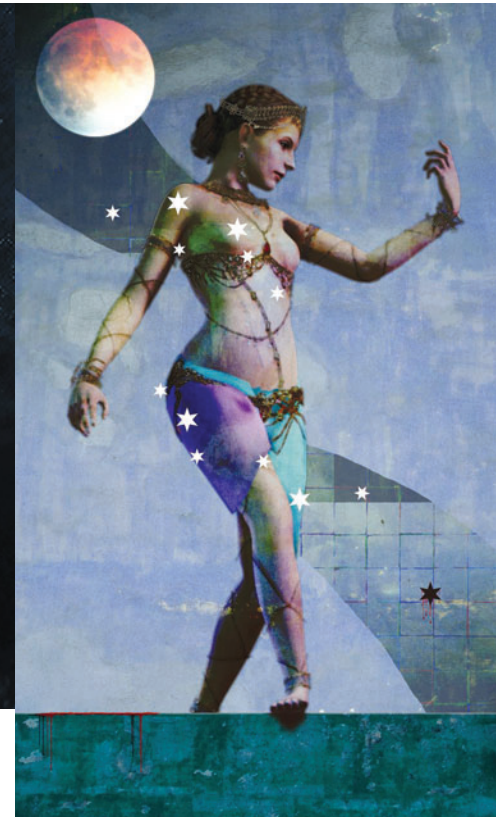
Less than a year after its previous effort, *The Path*, indie team Tale of Tales is preparing to release its next project on October 5, tentatively titled “Fatale.” As if this announcement weren’t surprising enough, founders Auriea Harvey and Michael Samyn dropped the surprise bomb that Fatale’s main character, the beautiful princess Salome, is being designed, modeled and textured by Takayoshi Sato, well known to Silent Hill fans for his inimitable character design and CGI work on Konami’s beloved horror series. He’ll be creating other, unannounced characters for Fatale as well.

“We’ve always admired Mr. Sato’s work,” said Auriea and Michael. “In fact, if it weren’t for his masterful work in *Silent Hill 1* and *2*, we would probably never have started making video games. He does not design superheroes or puppets, but real people, people you

want to know, people you want to be close to. The style we are aiming for with Fatale is more naturalistic than anything we have made so far. But we want to retain the magical quality and openness to interpretation that is characteristic of our work. Takayoshi is one of the few designers in the world capable of pulling this off. We asked him. And he said yes. We couldn’t be happier!”

Takayoshi Sato (left) and Tale of Tales (Michael Samyn and Auriea Harvey) re-invent Salome.

What makes Fatale’s version of Salome so complex? She is being designed to represent every facet of her legend simultaneously: the biblical princess who seduced men to their doom and demanded the head of John the Baptist;



“...if it weren’t for [Sato’s] masterful work in *Silent Hill 1* and *2*, we would probably never have started making video games.”

Auriea Harvey and Michael Samyn, Tale of Tales



an innocent teenage girl, scarcely aware of her own power as a woman, manipulated into love all too easily; and Oscar Wilde’s Salome, a twisted, passionate and debauched soul. “Takayoshi Sato designs characters the way a novelist describes them or a sculptor carves them,” the Belgium-based designers commented. “Their personality is expressed in their appearance and they are covered with very recognizable details.”

Tale of Tales’ projects invite personal interpretation of events in esoteric and eerily beautiful worlds. The re-imagined legend of Salome, Sato’s multi-faceted femme Fatale, continues an intriguing commitment to art and game experimentation.

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Console wars reignited?

It took a long time, but it looks like Sony and Microsoft might finally be approaching equal competitive footing in the tooth and nail fight for console supremacy. A quick run-down of the facts: Sony unveiled the long-rumored PS3 Slim at Gamescom in Germany last month, simultaneously dropping the price of their flagship console to \$299 while announcing they would be phasing out the fatter original units. In the closing days of August Microsoft then (seemingly) followed suit, dropping the price of their Pro and Elite models to \$249 and \$299, respectively, also announcing they would also be ceasing production on Pros in the coming months. Now with news of slashing the Japanese 360's price early this month, could this mean we may be gearing up for another bout of blows between MS and Sony? Between PS3's blu-ray vs. 360's online infrastructure, improved exclusive titles, competitive price points and new motion controllers from both companies hitting early next year, there may be one hell of a grudge match looming on the horizon. Stay tuned...



Fan-made Star Wars game is SCUMM-y

LucasArts' newfound commitment to their classic SCUMM point-and-clicks of the mid-nineties is great news for gamers, but that hasn't stopped Stacy Davidson from taking matters into her own hands. She's attempting what Lucas never did: a built-from-scratch Star Wars adventure in the vein of the re-released Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis, starring everyone's favorite galactic smuggler. Using an early version of LucasArts' SCUMM engine, The Han Solo Adventures is a freeware work of "interactive fan fiction," Davidson says, and is based loosely on information about Han's escapades before A New Hope. Davidson is tackling the project solo (hah) and is still in early stages of development. You can follow her progress at www.hansoloadventures.com.



Kirsten Dunst, Cosplayer

Kirsten Dunst (*actress, Spiderman*) is no stranger to anime. Having voiced the main character in Studio Ghibli's *Kiki's Delivery Service*, as well as confessing to her love of Sailor Moon more than a decade ago, it shouldn't be shocking to see her dressed up as an anime character in Akihabara, for an upcoming McG's film at the Tate Modern in London.

It shouldn't be shocking, but it is. And it's awesome.

Though the film, short, uh ... video, whatever, won't be out for a while, this photo, which appeared on theifrisky.com, is a preview of just how cool cosplaying can be, when you're not stretching the costumes over an extra three-hundred-pounds of fandom.

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Gaming Gone By File #008

words Eric L. Patterson



Game Boy's Games Man

1997

Back in Gaming Gone By File #006, we took a look at the Virtual Boy, the strange gaming hardware creation of Gunpei Yokoi, considered to be one of Nintendo's few true product failures.

It would be unfair of us, however, to only look upon Mr. Yokoi for the Virtual Boy, and not the countless successes he had during his life. Originally landing a job at Nintendo in 1965 as part of the maintenance crew for the company's Hanafuda card assembly line, it would be a simple toy created to help pass his free time that would get Gunpei finally noticed by the company's president, Hiroshi Yamauchi. That toy went on to be known as the "Ultra Hand," and when it went on to sell over one million units for Nintendo, Gunpei was promoted to a role in product development. In that position, he helped create a number of popular Nintendo-brand toys, such as the baseball-tossing Ultra Machine, the Love Tester, and a line of Nintendo Beam Gun games that were crafted in conjunction with Masayuki Uemura, a solar panel expert from Sharp.

When Nintendo saw a place for themselves in the blossoming video game market, they began looking for different ideas which could help them make such advances. After noticing a business man playing with a pocket calculator during a train ride, Gunpei came up with the idea of a small, easy to carry gaming device, and the Game & Watch was born. Featuring a simple LCD display, each Game & Watch unit was only able to offer up a few basic types of gameplay for one specific title; and yet, the Game & Watch series would go on to see over fifty different versions released over the course of 11 years. The line of handhelds also gave birth to a very important part of gaming hardware: a single-piece device for controlling the moment of an on-screen character that we now know as the d-pad.

It was another project targeted at the handheld market that would end up far and away being Gunpei's biggest and best creation: the Game Boy. Gunpei was a firm believer in the idea of using cheap and common technology in new and interesting ways, and while the Game Boy was not an overly impressive unit from a hardware standpoint, it was able to bring to market a handheld gaming platform that had a reasonable price tag and that could last for a great deal of time on only a few batteries. This decision would end up proving to be a wise one, as competitors tried (and failed) to dethrone the Game Boy with offerings that, while presenting games in full color, cost far more and which lost many of the benefits of being portable due to far higher power needs.

Unfortunately, Gunpei Yokoi was never able to see the fruition of his final project—the Bandai WonderSwan—as he died before its release on October 4, 1997 after being sideswiped by a car while surveying the damage of a completely separate vehicular accident he had been involved in. Though his life was cut tragically short, the contributions he made to gaming are numerous and wide, and some of the beliefs he held in hardware and software design still drive Nintendo as a company to this day.

Developer Sound Off

words Brandon Justice

You Know, The Truth Is GI Joe Should Have Never Stopped Doing PSAs...

After the week I've had, I have to admit that I was all sorts of prepared to unload a ridiculous rant on subjects near and dear to my caffeine-laden brain, when a good friend reminded me that the industry isn't all angst and insanity and aimless effort, and that perhaps I'd be better served to count the considerable blessings bestowed upon my vocational endeavors by the wild, wonderful world of video game development.

And while I tend to get the giggles at the thought of such things, I figured it'd be fun to spare his copy editor the pain of policing my petulance and take a crack at citing some of the thoughts rumbling through my mind as I do my damndest to fight through finagling hell with a team full of code-wielding commandos and a vat of French Roast coffee.

But no mater how much go-juice and rhetoric I ingest these days, I keep coming back to one thing:

I love my job.

And sure, one would *think* that considering some of the alternatives I endured prior to embracing my inner 12-year old and giving in to a life of spreadsheets,

**Developing a game is
an impossible mix of
talent and tempers and
technology that's a bitch
to endure and a joy to
watch all the same.**



schedules and the occasional fit of flirtation with that period in development where ideas matter more than reality, but honestly, there are as many days that make you wonder as there are ones that make you believe.

Part of it is the unique experience that each new mix of personalities and objectives brings, and part of it is the fact that the job is never what they sell you. It's always a bit less than you wanted, a bit more than you can handle, and a whole heaping handful of help towards your ability to do it better, but it's definitely more than a bunch of people sitting around playing games all day.

It's an impossible mix of talent and tempers and technology that's a bitch to endure and a joy to watch all the same. It's seeing something and buying in to its purpose; further, it's doing whatever you can to make it real. It's losing hours and days and weeks to stupid problems that melt away in mere moments when you realize that, despite it all, you and your teammates have built something that will help gamers forget all of their own problems for a little while, and in my experience, that's always worth more than you think it will be when you're getting started.

And sure, there will always be times when it sucks. Instances where you're reminded that probably more people are in this for a paycheck and a promotion than the thought of what it was to come home with a new game and lose countless hours to your imagination and a bunch of bitmaps.

There will be moments when you'll want to scream. To break something. To give up on the whole thing and wander the earth in search of something less muddled by ignorance and insistence— but then *it happens*.

Somehow, someway, that sad, strange collection of ideas and energy calms down; congealing into something that resembles an actual game, and you realize you're almost there.

Your shit finally comes together and you know that no matter what happens next, you've helped make something larger than anything you could have accomplished alone, and you remember the one thing that experience teaches any craftsmen:

There is as much to learn from the journey as there is from the destination itself.

The funny thing is that, the more that I do this, the more I start to wonder which one I value the most. I mean, even though making games is a real bitch, I am glad this industry has put up with me long enough to let me chase the ideas I had when I was little while learning what it means to be big.

Despite all the complaining I do on these pages, that something that's pretty difficult to harp on, right?

Brandon Justice is probably complaining about something right now to some poor soul at Quick Hit Sports. His guess is they'll talk him down from the tower and help him find a way to fix it. Feel free to complain about him directly by mailing bjjustice@quickhit.com.

play

Database

OCTOBER 2009

Play Magazine Top 10 Most Wanted

01	Metroid Other M	Wii	Nintendo
02	Bayonetta	Xbox 360/PS3	Sega
03	Assassin's Creed 2	Xbox 360/PS3	Ubisoft
04	Sin & Punishment 2	Wii	Nintendo
05	No More Heroes 2	Wii	Marvelous
06	Uncharted 2 Among Thieves	PS3	SCEA
07	White Knight Chronicles	PS3	SCEA
08	God of War II	PS3	SCEA
09	Darksiders	Xbox 360/PS3	THQ
10	Super Mario Bros. Wii	Wii	Nintendo

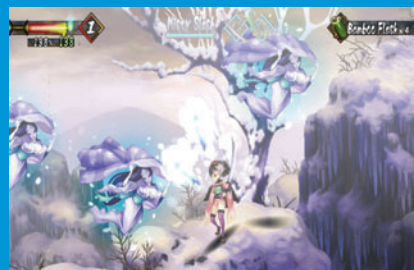


Ophelia's Angels

Where do you find guns for your Razor Girls in the land of Metal? Herd a pack of Razorfire Boars anywhere near Ophelia and she'll get it out of 'em...

Play Top 5: Now Playing

Brutal Legend	360/PS3
Muramasa: The Demon Blade	Wii
Batman: Arkham Asylum	360/PS3
Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2	PS3
Mini Ninjas	360

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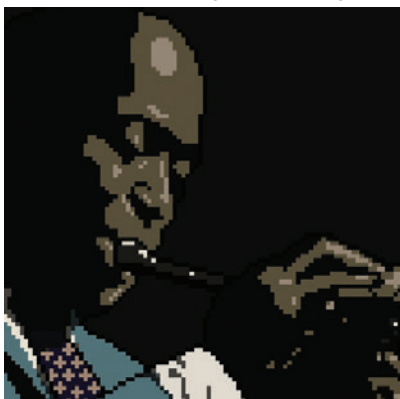
Gaming culture

words Evan Shamoon

Kind of Awesome

Miles Davis's 1959 classic *Kind of Blue* is being celebrated once again, this time in the form of a complete 8-bit re-imagining. The aptly named "Kind of Bloop: An 8-bit Tribute to Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*," is a collaboration between several chiptune artists (Ast0r, Sergeo, Virt, Shnabubula, and Disasterpeace), brought together by Kickstarter.com to create a track-by-track remake of the album. The album is legally released (royalties have been paid), so you can get either one of the limited run of CDs or download the digital files. It's pretty much a note-for-note rework, so accuracy watchdogs among you should be satisfied.

<http://kindofbloop.com/>



Mutatione

Here's a game to put on your radar: While it's still early days (it's only been in development for a few months), Mutatione is a gorgeous-looking affair from Danish studio Die Gute Fabrik. With development support from the Danish Film Institute, the team is now six-strong; still, all that's known about the game thus far is that it recalls the mechanics and feel of such classics as the original 2D Prince of Persia, Flashback, and Another World (according to its creator, Mutatione is intended to have a stronger focus on story and mood). As always, there's the lingering issue of funding; judging from these early screens, we certainly hope the money shows up in some form or another.



Crochet vs. Videogames

Etsy, quickly becoming the de facto stop for crafty, one-of-a-kind (or at least few-of-a-kind), homemade videogame goodness, is now playing host to a new set: Michelle Rheaume's crocheted Mushroom Kingdom characters. While some of them have already been sold (the Mario-in-Tanooki-suit is pure win), you can email her for custom orders. And at \$20 for four, you're somehow paying Target prices for custom creations. Economics is confusing.

http://www.etsy.com/shop.php?user_id=5171315





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XBOX 360

A 3D Q&A with Blitz Game Studios Project Director Ollie Clarke

The how of Han Tao

Console gaming finally makes the jump to Digital 3D

words Dave Halverson

Kung-fu was synonymous with 8- and 16-bit gaming in much the same way urban and modern warfare are now. A sign of the times I guess. Partaking in the Hong Kong action cinema-style gameplay in Han Tao, combined with traditional (look ma, no wires!) aspects of kung fu, such as focussing one's "chi" to perform super-human-like feats of cartoon brutality, it all comes rushing back, only with pristine animation and set pieces that give it a Sammo Hung-like vitality...in awe-inspiring Digital 3D. Times don't always change for the better.

I've been waiting to conduct this interview since Sucker Punch put the 3D in 3D gaming with the anaglyph levels in Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves. Marvelling at the Kung-Fu theatre style action in Invincible Tiger: The Legend of Han Tao in polarized 3D today, it's hard to believe that it took 4 years for 3D gaming to approach the visual fidelity of 3D movies, but now that Blitz Game Studios and Namco Bandai Games have paved the way, let's hope other publishers follow suit, and that NBG doesn't stop with Han Tao. Those beautifully outlined character models in SURGE's Afro Samurai sure would look amazing in polarized 3D. Say, didn't Gonzo make a sequel...?

I saw Invincible Tiger: The Legend of Han Tao wearing polarized 3D glasses at E3 and was completely floored. I've seen anaglyph before but figured it'd be a while before polarized 3D made its way to gaming. How are you achieving it while still offering anaglyph or no glasses play? Is this only possible in HD?

We're so glad you like the effect! While we relished the challenge in getting the first high-definition 3D console game made, it wasn't easy. A lot of hard work went into making it a possibility, so it's really rewarding to hear all the great feedback we've been getting.

Currently the effect only works on HD TVs that support 1080p or 1080i with a refresh rate of 120hz. There are already DLP and Plasma screens available that support this refresh rate. We've also been hearing about LCD televisions coming out over the next year that will be 3D-ready.

Digital 3D is set to become a standard feature in the majority of new TVs being developed and sold. We decided to include the anaglyph mode feature because we want to support as many formats as possible so as many people as possible can try it in different modes of 3D. Namco Bandai Games has been great in helping us make this happen. Their enthusiasm and support has been fantastic.

It's the diversity in 3D technology that separates Invincible Tiger from the other 3D-enabled games coming to the market. If you have access to a TV that can display the high-end digital stereoscopic and polarized 3D, that's great! But we don't want to alienate players who don't have access to that equipment. The 3D in Invincible Tiger works in such a way that players will be just as immersed in the game through anaglyph. I think players will be surprised about just how well regular anaglyph works.

I can vouch for that. What are the options to experience the full polarized effect?

Invincible Tiger supports both shutter and polarized glasses. There's a double catch here though: the shutter glasses are currently expensive but the TVs are relatively cheap. The polarized glasses are inexpensive (they're similar to the glasses given out at theaters for 3D movies) but conversely the TVs are currently expensive. Anaglyph glasses on the other hand, will work with any TV. Personally I feel the polarized glasses format is the

better of the two and that it will become the standard. As with any new technology, it will initially be an object of curiosity for early adopters given the production costs. But as 3D eventually becomes a standard feature with all new TVs, you'll see more consumer friendly prices.

When people download Invincible Tiger, how do they go about getting polarized glasses? Will the ones from the movies that we never recycle work?

Yes they will, on certain TVs. I guess here would be a good place to point out that we've set up a website, along with Namco Bandai Games, to support users who want to try out the digital and anaglyph 3D features. All the information players need or require can be found at www.invincibletiger.com/support.

Namco Bandai Games will also be giving away anaglyph 3D glasses to anyone in the United States

who downloads the game and fills out an order form on the product website, while supplies last. If anyone wants to provide us with feedback on the game and their experiences with digital 3D, we'd love to hear it!

How bad is the color loss using anaglyph 3D? Did you choose a color palette that would be less affected by the red/blue?

We've gone out of our way to support as many different anaglyph colors as we can. The player can choose from a whole range of colors to match the glasses they have. Some glasses work better than others at maintaining the color. We've included a lot of options so the answer is to just try it and see what works for you.

Does the technology increase development cost or take a lot of extra time or effort?

We estimate that implementing 3D into a game requires around 10-15% of the overall budget. It's also important to start a game with 3D in mind. It's not a good idea to attempt to bolt it on halfway through development for example.

The most important area to get right is the frame rate. Good 3D games will run at 60fps. Anything less and the effects become jarring on the eyes. A game running at 60fps, as Invincible Tiger does, is a much smoother and therefore a much more aesthetically pleasing experience. Digital 3D is something that has to be experienced to be appreciated and I hope that many of your readers will get the chance to try it out soon!

(You heard the man...) What have you done specifically in Invincible Tiger to bring out the 3D? Is the game markedly better in 3D?

Where most people would assume we would make levels stick out of the screen, we decided to go the opposite way and make levels expand into the background. We felt this created the effect of bringing the characters to life, as if they were on a theater stage.

A lot of people are understandably cynical about the whole 3D experience, given how the technology has

"Digital 3D is set to become a standard feature in the majority of new TVs being developed and sold..."





often been implemented in the past. Once we had it running smoothly, the game became that much more involving. This is where digital 3D really is in a class of its own. We got involved with digital 3D because we thought it would be fun, and it has exceeded our expectations. Having said that, I watched an interview with James Cameron where he talked about making the upcoming 3D film Avatar. He made it clear that he made sure it was a great 2D film first and an amazing 3D experience second. I think the same philosophy applies to digital 3D

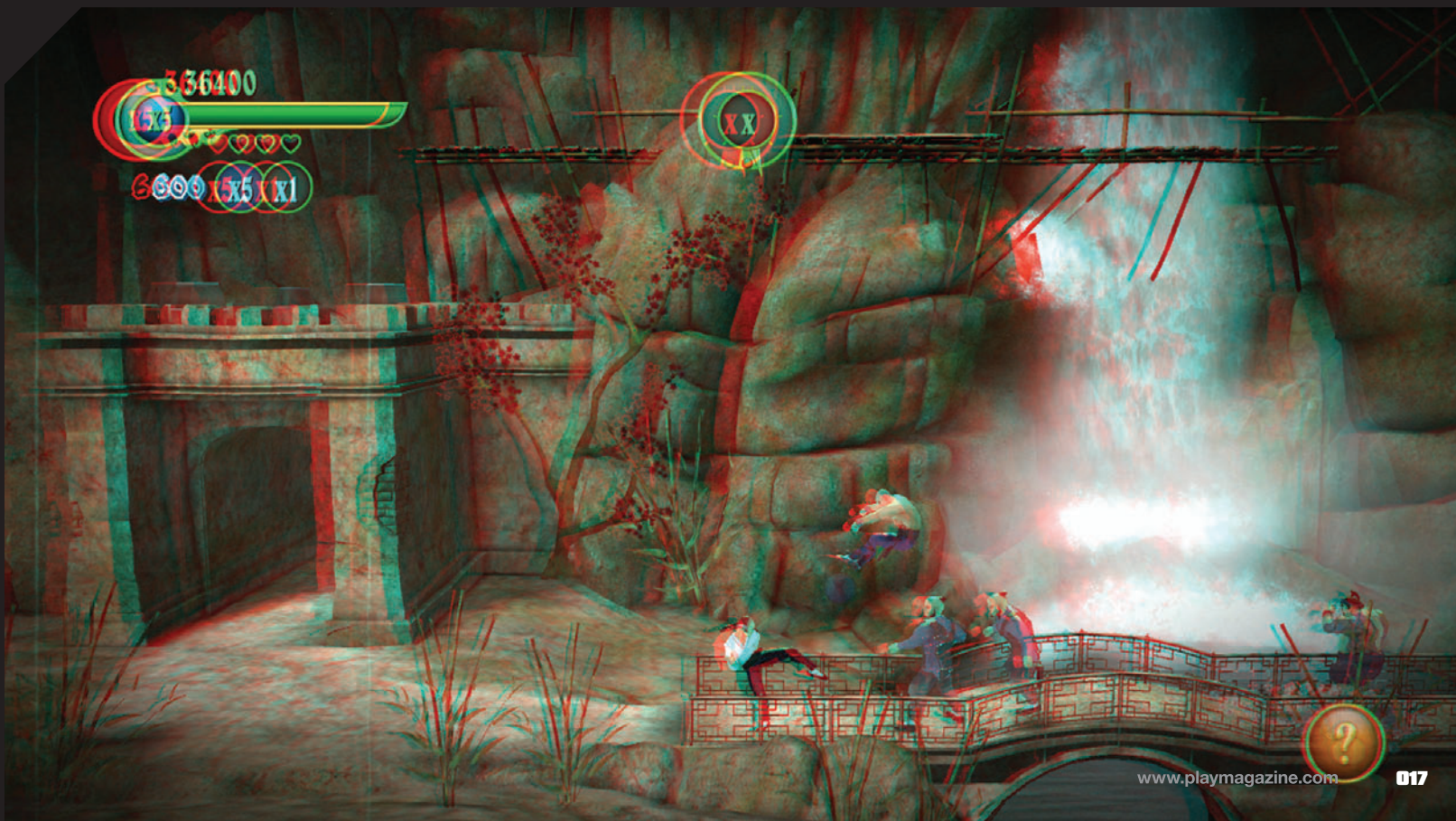
games. We spent a lot of time making Invincible Tiger a great 2D kung fu action game first and a silky smooth digital 3D game second.

I know that this is a silly question but given you're such a pioneering company I figure you're the ones to ask...Will a holographic game system ever be possible?

If history teaches us anything, it's that anything is possible. It depends on the will of a few pioneers and

how enjoyable the resulting experience is. We've had so much fun developing digital stereoscopic 3D for Invincible Tiger I can certainly see it happening. As it is there are some very exciting technological developments happening over the next few years that will certainly be keeping us on our toes!

--When a 1/8 scale Bayonetta is hopping around on my flat, flat screen, life will truly be complete! ...How's that de-aging drug coming along I wonder... [play](#)







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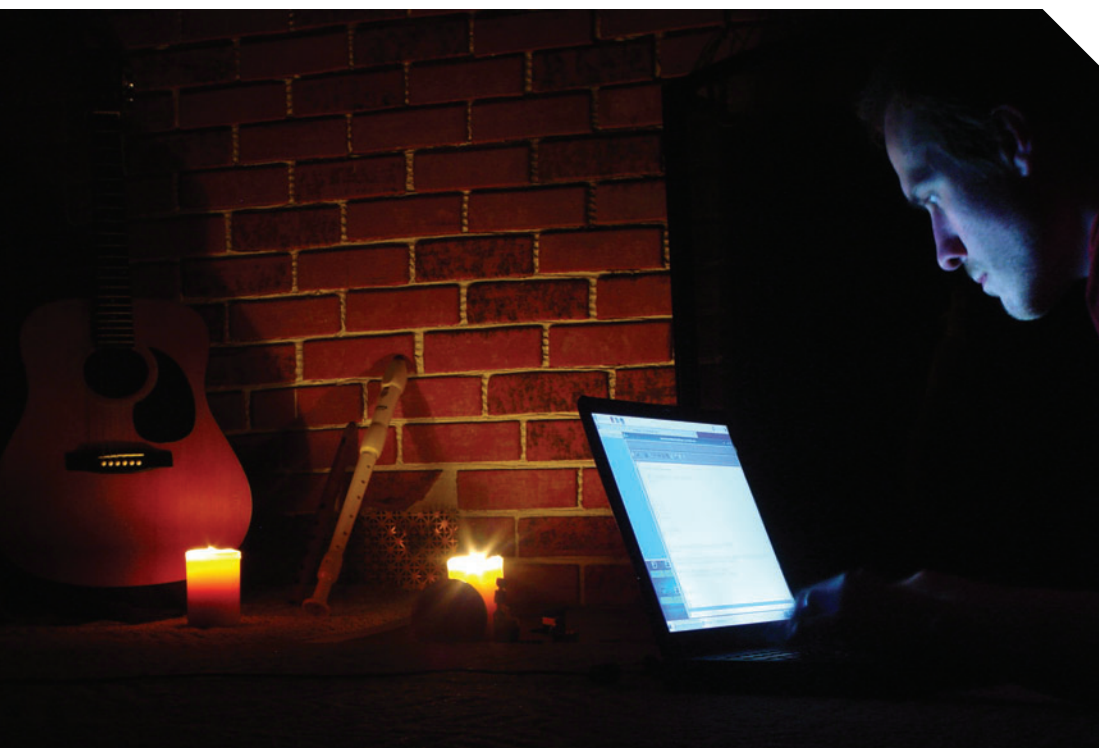
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The Simple Life

Jason Rohrer

The master of indie

words Evan Shamoon

Jason Rohrer makes videogames, precisely zero of which involve headshots or flying jump kicks. Instead, his designs explore the human condition in more subtle ways; *Gravitation* is about “mania, melancholia, and the creative process,” while his award-winning *Passage* abstractly depicts a man’s journey through life over the course of five minutes. His games are more akin to interactive, visual poetry than they are to the (cue monster truck rally voice) “blockbuster experience” that has thus far come to define the medium. Rohrer’s games have been shown at festivals and art exhibitions around the world, and many have referred to their experience with *Passage* as the most emotionally engaging they have had with a videogame. He spoke to us from his home in rural Potsdam, New York, where he lives with his wife and two children.

play: What initially got you interested in game design?
 Jason Rohrer: Like most American males my age, I’ve been playing video games for most of my life, and for

most of my life, I enjoyed them a great deal. “I’m going to make a game someday” is a fantasy that lots of my friends seemed to share, but none of them ever seemed to realize—sorta like dreaming about being a rock star, I guess. I had that game design dream for most of my life and tried to make a game or two along the way, but making games is hard. After studying computer science in college and grad school, and after programming other stuff for about eight years (and becoming good at programming in the process), I once again said, “hey, I’m going to make a game,” but that time, I actually finished one and released it (*Transcend*, 2004 [transcend.sf.net]). The Web was in full force by that time, and the “indie games” movement was just starting to bud, so I also had some pretty powerful channels for getting my game out there. Enough people played it to make it worthwhile, though my game got rejected from both of the prominent festivals of the day.

A year or so later, I thought I should try making another game, but with more specific intent—not just

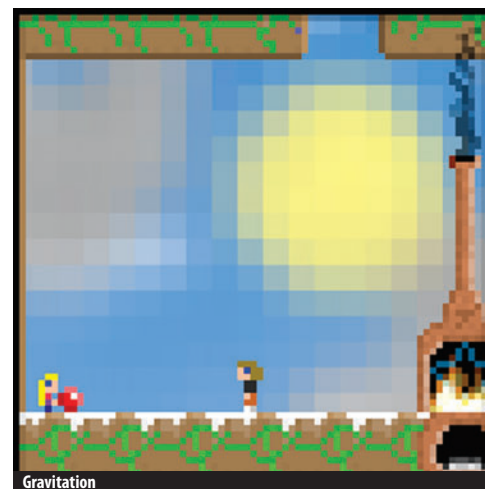
to make some game or any game, but to make a really good game. I started reading books. Two of them, Chris Crawford’s classic “*Art of Computer Game Design*” and Raph Koster’s more recent “*A Theory of Fun*,” hit me really hard. Hmmm...can we make art with our games? I also started studying board games and set out to design one as an exercise. I learned about the German board game movement, and it was like a whole new world opened up to me. Mechanics! I don’t think I had really thought about mechanics very explicitly before. But here were all these new mechanics, games essentially “about” their interesting mechanics, and no real “genre” ruts to speak of. Why make a shooter or a platformer when you could make something completely new?

A year later, after consuming all of those ideas, I wove them together into an art game based on new mechanics (*Cultivation*, 2006 [cultivation.sf.net]). Lots of people played that game too, and on top of that, it got accepted into one of the prominent festivals. At that point, I got sucked into the world of game design, and I haven’t had a chance to come up for air since.

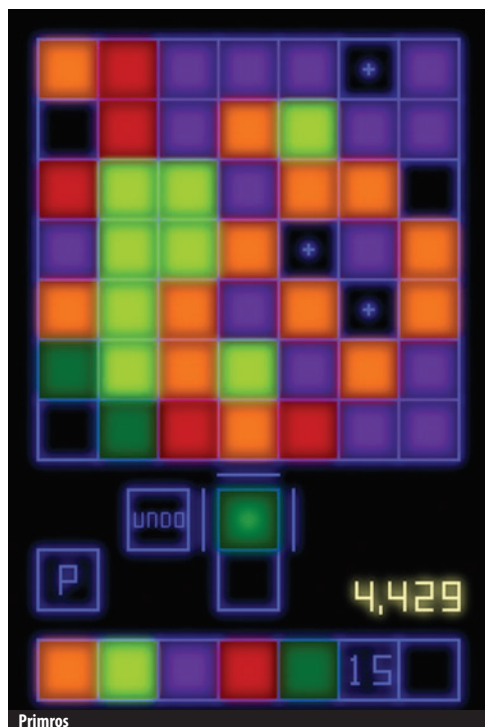
You have chosen to live a rather rural, ascetic existence. Is that a conscious choice meant to facilitate the “artistic” aspect of what you do, i.e. to maintain financial independence from those who see games as something very different from “art?”

Along with matching our ideals, our lifestyle gives us the freedom to work on what we want to work on instead of just working on projects that are certain to bring in money. How much would people be willing to pay for a five minute game about death? Probably nothing. That doesn’t mean that such a game shouldn’t be made, or that it won’t have a positive impact on the world. “Good” and “sellable” diverge quite a bit.

Most people think they “need” a job, but the reality is that most of their “job money” is being spent on needs



The longest art game I played so far was Braid, and it was certainly worth every minute of the time that I gave to it.



created by having a job—expensive home location, childcare, daily transportation, convenience foods, job clothing, weekend escape entertainment, and necessary-for-sanity vacations. We don't need any of that stuff, which in turn means we spend a tiny amount of money each year, which in turn means we don't need jobs.

I'm doing a bit of paid work right now, but all the extra income is being banked to buy more freedom in the future instead of being blown on a gigantic TV or whatever.

What was sort of the heart of the experience you wanted to convey with *Passage*? Do you feel like it was a blueprint for something—larger, more immersive, with more varied gameplay—that you want to create in the future?

I wanted to convey these very specific, nuanced feelings that I was having about the passing of my own life. I was nearing my 30th birthday, approaching the birth of my second child, and doing a lot of thinking about how this in fact was all really happening to me. When I was a kid and asked my mother about death, she told me that it will happen to everyone, including to me and to her, but that I shouldn't worry too much about it because it was a long time away.

My grandfather, who I seem to take after pretty closely, died in his early 60s. As I approached 30, the old "it's a long time away" trick from my childhood offered very little comfort.

A close friend of ours in town had died that fall, and her memorial service presented a very beautiful portrait of her life—a portrait that could only be drawn when her life was complete. So on the one hand, I had this profound sense of existential terror, and on the other hand, I had an appreciation of the profound beauty of a life that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And of course, there are some very difficult choices along the way. I wanted to tie all of this together into a tight little game.

No, it isn't a blueprint for something larger. A poem is not necessarily a seed for a short story, nor is a short story merely a seedling that will someday grow into a novel. *Passage* was meant to be a tiny game. In fact, it would likely fail as a work of art if I tried to make it any larger or more immersive.

What other sorts of experiences are you currently trying to explore with your game design? (Note: the

word "game" itself feels like a particularly arcane term in the context of this conversation.)

I've made 10 games since *Passage*, and they explored a variety of topics—parenthood, regret, immortality, otherness, and so on. For a while, I was focused on the idea of expression lurking directly in the mechanics and uncovered by the player through the gameplay. This is part of what Ian Bogost has called the "proceduralist style," and that name fits well enough.

After making a number of games in this style, I felt that I was running up against some limitations. My games had to be played to be experienced, certainly (so they were in fact games and not wannabe movies), but they didn't offer very deep play. After a run or two through *Passage*, you've pretty much seen everything there is to see—you can stop playing at that point. There are many layers of meaning and lots to think about, but the play feels relatively shallow to me compared to games like *Go*, *Tetris*, or even *Pac-Man*.

Inspired by the deep play that I've seen so frequently in board games, I became interested in turn-based multiplayer games. But if you're making turn-based, multiplayer video games, why not just make board games? What does the computer buy you? In many cases, it buys you more complexity—more units and parameters than would be practical with pencil and paper—but that's not a very satisfying gain (in theory, you still "could" play such games on paper). I'm currently working on a turn-based multiplayer game that fundamentally could not exist as a board game. It should be released next spring.

In choosing the "art games" route, you and your family have been subsisting on an incredibly small budget. Do you grow much of your own food? What have been the biggest hurdles in maintaining this lifestyle? Please describe your approach to sustaining yourself.

If we really want to do that kind of cinematic stuff, we should be doing a better job.

In terms of growing food, we try more than we succeed. We planted a buch of fruit trees many years ago, and a few of them just started producing substantial quantities last year. 70 plums, 30 apples, 10 bunches of grapes, a few cups of currants and gooseberries. That was enough to give us free fruit during the few weeks that they were producing, but nothing for the rest of the year. What about dried beans and grains, which we eat a lot of? We'd need a few planted acres to meet our needs. Our yard is only 1/2 acre. On top of that, our growing season is short. So far, what we do grow saves us a small bit of money, but that's it.

We're improving our growing situation substantially by moving to New Mexico—we're leaving New York on July 20. We'll have a year-round growing season with warmer overall temperatures. We anticipate being able to grow most of our green vegetables most of the year there. Moving to New Mexico will also reduce our property taxes and heating bills. We currently squeak by on \$14,500 per year for four people, but we may be able to survive on a bit less after the move. This "low burn rate" gives us a lot of freedom to do what we want with our time, including spending a lot of time together as a family. I eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner with my family 7 days a week. It also allows me to pursue projects with no economic value, like *Passage*. When I occasionally work for pay, that pay goes a lot farther. One brief job contract might support us for a whole year. Extra money can go right into savings for the future.

The biggest hurdle is weaning ourselves off of "buying stuff" as an emotional crutch. I still have that bug, and it can be hard to stay on the wagon. But that's where most of my money used to go—into buying interesting stuff that I really didn't need. Most of it is driven by boredom, I think. The best cure for that is keeping busy.

Do you play many games these days—"mainstream", "indie", or otherwise?

I certainly don't play as many AAA games as I used to. First of all, with a spouse, two kids, and plenty of my own work to do, I don't have as much time as I used to. But beyond that, I don't find as many games to be worth my time. Games that enriched my life when I was 20, like *Metal Gear Solid* games, no longer seem to be worth it.

I do skim across the surface and try to keep up with the high points, though. Over the past few years, I've played *Disgaea*, *Portal*, *BioShock*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, and *Far Cry 2*. Things are certainly getting better, and developers have become more ambitious in terms of artistic quality. Still, if I'm torn between watching a "must see" movie and playing a "must play" AAA game, the movie usually wins, because it's more likely to be worth my time. Like, "Martin Scorsese film or *GTA4*?" That question is a bit of a joke, no matter what the *New York Times* is saying.

I also try to keep up with the art game scene. That's much less time consuming, because there are so few art games made and most of them are so short. The longest one so far was *Braid*, and it was certainly worth every minute of the time that I gave to it.

In terms of narrative, the choice between a Scorsese film and *GTA4* is indeed a bit of a joke. Can you imagine a time when it's not? In other words, do you believe that games—and I speak here of "realistic" games that portray human characters doing human things—can accomplish what film and literature have already done? In other words, is the emotive, narrative experience that many claim to be in games' future simply a fantasy? Is the "games are still in their infancy" argument simply an excuse for a medium that doesn't render truly emotional narrative experiences very well (beyond the emotions of fear, pressure, et al.)?

No, I believe that it is possible for games to portray human characters doing human things in a competent manner. I don't think that there's much value in games doing that, given that we already have movies, but that's beside the point. The point is that even our best efforts in the linear narrative direction are pathetic. If we really want to do that kind of cinematic stuff, we should be doing a better job. First step might be getting the lip movements to match the voice acting—this problem has gotten worse, not better, as lip-polygon-counts have increased. But a bigger problem cannot be solved with technology or elbow grease: we simply don't have that kind of talent in our industry, and we're not very good at attracting it.

Who within our industry can actually write good dialogue? I'll strap myself to the post here and admit that I can't. Well, maybe I could, but I never have! Want me to write for your next AAA game? And when it comes to attracting that kind of talent, if you're the next Charlie Kaufman or Christopher Nolan, and you're trying to pick a career, are you going to pick movies or games? Those super-talented people are attracted to movies because there's a huge body of amazing historical work to inspire them. We need to have that kind of medium-bootstrapping in place before we can lure the geniuses of the future over to our side of the fence.

Again, I don't think that games necessarily should be about writing and narrative. But for whatever reason, modern games are about those things, despite the fact that those things interfere with interactivity. Still, if you're going to do it, at least do it well. [play](#)

Rohrer's work can be found on his website: <http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/jason-rohrer/>

iPhone GAMING

words Evan Shamoon

Spiders: Not So Bad!

After being hired to help create the Steven Spielberg game collaboration LMNO for Electronic Arts—only to subsequently watch as the game was cancelled before his very eyes, halfway through—developer Randy Smith saw only one appealing option: go it alone. And so the game designer packed his bags and left sunny Los Angeles for the rather snowier climes of Vermont, where he began work on Spider: The Secret of Bryce Manor. The end result is a game rich with atmosphere and subtle, addictive gameplay; you control the spider, hopping around, creating webs, and catching your prey, while also experiencing an ambient, unfolding story concerning your dusty, dilapidated surroundings, Bryce Manor. It's a steal at \$2.99—something iPhone owners are clearly figuring out, as the game just hit #4 on the App Store.



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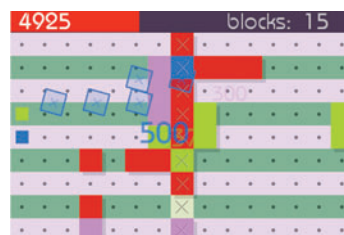
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Music and Blocks, Blocks and Music



apps.stfj.net
iPhone apps by Zach Gage

It might look like just another block-drop/puzzle game, but Unify is one that's worth paying attention to. Instead of a single piece falling from the top of the screen to the bottom, two pieces move in from the sides towards the middle, simultaneously, and you must manage them simultaneously using multitouch. As you advance, different color blocks are brought into the mix; the goal is to make combinations of four or more of the same color, so that they disappear. Beautiful design and music that evolves with the gameplay make this more than just another Tetris clone. Developer Zach Gage's other work-in-progress, Face It, is a 3D audio game designed to be used with the iPhone 3GS's compass—you basically find sounds in your world, and the challenge becomes to orient yourself towards them. Cool stuff.



NES Lives on iPhone

While not quite a game, per se, this 8-bit iPhone synth from Japan's NewForestar has games in its blood. Though it lacks built-in tracking/sequencing, it includes a 'P2P' mode for two-phone for jamming the hell out with a friend on your respective phones. Little touches like the tilt-sweep effect (using the device's accelerometers), and a "Super Geek" mode where you use the NES/Famicom controllers to play (rather than the standard keyboard), make this kind of awesome, really.



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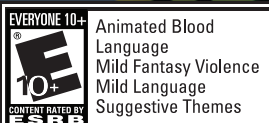
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The
Bottleneck

words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

Cutting out the fat...

When last we met, we were talking about overloading your pongs. (You'll want to check out the August issue.) For every pong, there is both a mechanical and a psychological component. Much as an elegant design overloads mechanical functions to simplify the player's reactions—say, by mapping several distinct yet thematically similar behaviors to a single button—a significant design overloads psychological functions on every interaction between the game and the player.

If you want to instill in the player a particular state of mind and a certain learned response to stimulation, thereby setting you up for appropriate emotional affect, then ideally each decision asked of the player should be mechanically,

conceptually, and thematically educative. The idea is to give the player a sense of implication to his every action. Though it may not be immediately clear what it means, every decision the player makes should feel, and on several levels be, significant.

Pay especial attention to the opening chapter of *Half-Life 2*. Nothing is wasted. In an early moment, a Combine soldier blocks your path. He tosses a soda can at your feet and barks at you to throw it away for him. If you pick up the can and place it in the trash, he chuckles and steps aside, letting you past. It's a simple moment, and most players will whiz through without especially thinking

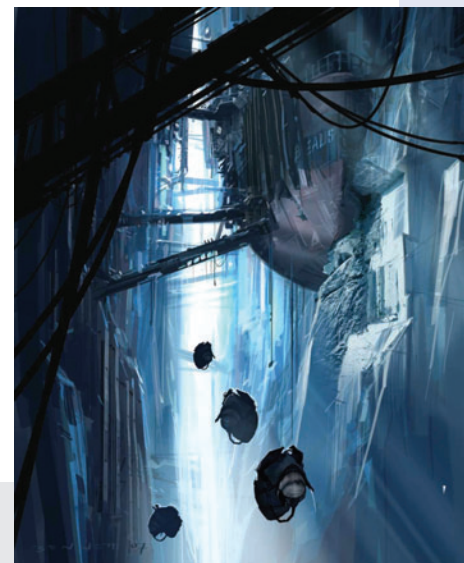
about it. Let's see what this beat shows us, though.

Most immediately it hints something of the game's scenario. You've an authoritarian, dehumanized bully, against whom you are effectively helpless, going out of his way to demean you. You really hate this guy, and you quickly deduce that his friends are no better. It also shows something of the way enemies in this game will behave; if you annoy him, say by rather throwing the can at his head, he will come after you with a stun baton, giving you your first taste of danger. He can't kill you, but the effects of being hit are surprising and unpleasant. If you run, he will follow you to a point. If not, he will approach slowly, cautiously.

More pragmatically, the scene teaches you about the game's physics engine and how to pick up and drop objects. You can fiddle with the can to your leisure, tossing and kicking it around or gingerly placing it where you please. This in turn hints at the game's focus on open-ended problem solving. Although your goal is set for you—all you really need to do is get through the door—how achieve that is up to you, and is based entirely on the tools at hand.

Most significantly, only a few minutes into the game the player is already prepared for the later appearance of his Excalibur, the Gravity Gun. The Gravity Gun is the whole point of *Half-Life 2*; the first half of the game is a quest to claim this prize, and the second half serves to explore its ramifications. If you will, the can and the soldier is Chekhov's gun on the mantelpiece.

There is again both a mechanical and a psychological aspect to this early exposition. Mechanically, it ensures



that you are perfectly prepared to use the gravity gun when it appears. Psychologically, it gets the player thinking about the world in terms of touch. As detached as Gordon Freeman is, as alien to this world you are as a player, you can reach out into this world and affect things. You are an outside agent for limited change, within the system. That's pretty much what the G-Man tells you at the start and end of the game, and that's pretty much the message that the game enforces the whole way through.

The level design is a good example, as while it severely limits the player's real choices, it is carefully designed to make the player think his every decision is very clever indeed. This serves to make the world feel more immense—who knows what was down those (actually impassible) paths the player avoided? It also makes the game feel dynamic, as every turn the player makes feels immediate and important. However cleverly the player winds his way through the levels, the Combine are always right behind, creating a sense of forward pressure and even less deliberate thought. The player continues to charge forward on instinct, choosing whatever route feels best.

So. You don't want to make a show of it, but if a videogame is all about the decisions you make and their ramifications, what you really want to do is impregnate every possible decision with as much feedback as possible—preferably as subconscious or as unconscious as you can make it. If you make it too obvious what you're doing, you're not teaching; you're just bragging at the player's expense. And if there's one thing you never want to do, you don't want to take the player for granted. Because they can be so very fickle. And enough of this abuse, and the game industry will crumble. [play](#)



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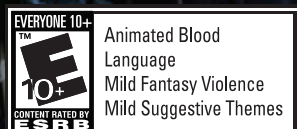
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Magnacarta 2

Never kill the ones you love

words Dave Halverson

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y RPG journey began in 1988 in the Algol Solar System when I slipped into a Zen-like state guiding Alis Landale through the first-person dungeons and lunar plains of Phantasy Star—4 megs (and

Battery Back-Up!) of sheer 8-bit wonder, for a mere \$70. From that point on if I wasn't playing an RPG, I was waiting for one, and the ones that stuck, like Phantasy Star II (with animated attacks!) and IV, Shining in the Darkness, Final Fantasy VI, Chrono Trigger, and Lunar the Silver Star always left me wanting more. 1997 was the year of more. Three Japanese RPGs hitting in the same year in the US was uncommon, but two exceptional JRPGs (Wild Arms and Shining the Holy Ark) and Final Fantasy VII...on PlayStation...changed everything.

In a move that can only be compared to the Stay Puft Marshmallow incident of '84, by pulling the plug on their SNES-CD deal with Sony, Nintendo chose the form of their destructor...“PlayStation.” The ensuing move by Square from Nintendo to Sony was the final death knell for cartridges and the most influential RPG series in the universe, Final Fantasy, as we knew it. Final Fantasy VII broke sales records and redefined the genre and Nintendo had none (I hear they're doing okay though) sure, but it also had a profound effect on Square's approach to game design. What if they had found a way to compromise and realize Yoshinori Kitase's new vision for FF VII on cartridge forgoing the CGI and MIDI soundtrack? Would it have been as big, or maybe bigger? ...No loading. Not only do I think it would have been, but I think where Square placed their emphasis on glamorous CGI and sophisticated, increasingly realistic characters afterwards they might have chosen a different course favoring strides in gameplay while staying true to a more exaggerated design aesthetic had they stuck with Nintendo. FF VII felt like an N64 game with CGI and arranged BGM (and what a beautiful score, although I still consider those amazing SNES OSTs as the series-defining sound) and although IX saw a brief return to a more fictive design, the series, and RPGs in general, seemed to slip into a period where variations on the same basic CGI-heavy turn-based theme trumped the kind of gameplay innovation that was emerging in games like Chrono Trigger. There were a few exceptions, like Thousand Arms, with its 2D battles and “paper”-

Magnacarta 2 is the quintessential model for the evolution of the RPG...





The Southern Forces
Anti-Sentinel Unit
doing what they do
best...



SOFTMAX are true to a very specific vision and design aesthetic...

are up to the task at hand. And between Hyung Tae Kim's character designs (and the amazing job SOFTMAX does transitioning them into 3D) the best battle-system going, and the real-time nature of the gameplay, Magnacarta 2 is the quintessential model for the evolution of the RPG, without becoming something else entirely.

All of the main characters in Magnacarta 2 are beautiful; men and women alike—even Argo (for a Trewa). Not in a boy-band/Dude, Where's my Blitzball way like, say, Tidus, but more elegant only without the pretension. Crocell, for instance, looks like your typical pretty-boy with his perfect hair and tailored royal garb, yet he's almost uncomfortably callous; and if he appears to be lightening up (as callous types often do) it will pass. The most prominent of the central characters, on the other hand, Juto is somewhat reserved and awkward, which is understandable considering he's lost his memory and discovered he harnesses considerable power, not to mention those dreams of his. Then there's Princess Rzephillda (Zephie), Queen of the Lanzheim Kingdom and leader of the Anti-Sentinel Unit of the Southern Forces, a special unit trained to bring down the Northern Armies Sentinels—mysterious weapon systems that could turn the tide of the war in their favor. A war that began when Zephie's mother, Queen Evelyn, was assassinated by the Prime Minister Schuenzeit, self-appointed King and Supreme Commander of the Northern Forces. Zephie fights by her unit's side knowing full well the Kingdom could fall if she's killed in battle. But then again if she didn't, where would that leave us? Of the six main characters—Juto, Crocell, Zephie, Argo, Celestine, and Rue—you'll come to know each one intimately. Everything from their strengths and weaknesses, hopes and dreams, to their pasts—some more tragic than others—and you'll do so almost unknowingly. Zephie and Juto are the focal point of the story, but there's no set lead on the field or in battle. You can choose any three (and toggle who leads) at any time, all of which are displayed in proper scale with the weapon you've equipped them with in full shiny

style sprites on 3D environments (and you thought Paper Mario was first) and later Grandia II, but otherwise other than FF IX and X-2, and The Skies of Arcadia, which I played for sheer character design, my love for traditional RPGs steadily declined—subjugated by alternative adventure RPGs like Vagrant Story.

Fate finally intervened in 2002, when I was poking around the internet—back when you could without feeling like you needed a shower afterwards—searching for a wallpaper, when I came across one of Hyung-Tae Kim's for Magna Carta: Phantom of Avalanche, which lead me to SOFTMAX and the realization that the most amazing RPG characters I'd seen since FF VII were strictly PC, and Korean PC at that. A few weeks later, however, fate intervened again at E3 2003 when I caught a glimpse of an Xbox game that looked like an Xbox 360 game from the future (Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders) and ended up spending half the day with Phantagram, the mecca of Korean game publishers, becoming versed in all things Korean-developed and headed to US...console! Innovation was alive and well, incubating in Korea. Eventually Phantagram split, and Blueside was formed, giving me three avenues to explore: Phantagram with N3, Blueside with Kingdom Under Fire and of course SOFTMAX, who was busy working on the Phantom of Avalanche sequel...Magna Carta: Crimson Stigmata (Tears of Blood) for the PS2.

Three utterly unique franchises to love, each a shining beacon of artistic stylization, but Magna Carta: Tears of Blood was the game that made me love RPGs again. A much better game than anyone gave it credit for, myself included,

beyond its innovative battle-system lied a story and overall framework that resonated unlike any Japanese RPG I'd ever played. Pity it was lost in an unfortunate shuffle. After a great experience doing the cover story and numerous updates for Tears, doing all we could to get the word out for SOFTMAX, Atlus had to farm it out to Canada for the localization in the wake of the writer's strike, and it wasn't pretty. Having played the localized text version sans voice for the initial feature, however, I already knew that I'd found the RPG series that would pick up where my fandom for Phantasy Star IV and FF VII left off. One of the things I like so much about Korean game design in general is how committed they are to delivering a unique experience. All too often developers seem so busy deciding who to imitate by the time they do, the imitation's out of date. If nothing else (but there's so much more) SOFTMAX are true to a very specific vision and design aesthetic that places the emphasis on a collective RPG experience where gameplay and overall flow trump plausibility in the interest of continuity. They're not distracted by pushing any technological envelopes to out-do the next guy either, because they invented their own. Magnacarta 2 looks like no other next-generation RPG, its vast, elegant, decidedly natural architecture giving way to its ensemble cast, and the many creatures and forces that stand (literally) in their way, not hidden away until the characters cross some hidden tripwire into a continuity shattering turn-based exchange. RPGs being essentially the evolution of recurring elements, the more refined the elements, the better the RPG, so long as the base elements



I could write a thesis on Skills, Kan accumulation, Overdrive, Overheat, Chains and Chain Breaks...

view, on every field and set piece, save for the main city center of Albazet. There's no need for them to tag along as you go about your RPG business, purchasing weapons and Kamond—jewels that fortify your weapons—and other useful items available at the Merchant Guild. Leaving Albazet, or any main thoroughfare, at no time do any of the characters become squashed or magically merge into one body, and the enemy soldiers, wizards, and various creatures are always in full view. If you're not on a mission and don't need experience or Kan (energy generated on the battlefield used for various skills), you can run on by, or press LT and presto, you've entered the battle-system to beat all battle-systems. I could write a thesis on Skills, Kan accumulation, Overdrive, Overheat, Chains and Chain Breaks...but it would only confuse what

becomes elementary in execution (plus, I already did in last issue's preview). Where so many similar systems are overly complex or intricate, to the point you end up abandoning them altogether and level grinding, the Chain System in Magnacarta 2 is less about timing and more about how well you've equipped the characters in your formation in regard to the territory, and whatever forces you're up against. But even then if it's not working out you can press LT at any time, disengage and you're back in Field Mode. You can't exit key battles but you can freely change formation, re-equip, and use items—just no Skill changes or weapon enhancement. It's all moot though anyway since anything remotely complex will be explained; often times by Zephie or one of your other comrades and then stored in Cube mail for reference. The dialogue in

Magnacarta 2 consists of full-body animated renders on either side of the screen...talking. It's not always plausible (injuries and so forth don't translate to the dialogue models), but it looks great and greatly enhances the dialogue, which is also...great! NBG always do RPGs right, but this may be their best casting yet. I can't imagine a better fit for any of the lead roles. Their dialogue models also show emotion in their facial expression, arm gestures and body language. Don't expect Hamlet but they definitely emote. Beats pinning inanimate talking heads to a dialogue box or excessive CGI better served for the big moments (which it is), that's for sure. I'm not playing a fantasy RPG for a plausibility. If your doors open, I'm coming in and if I see a treasure chest by the bed it's gonna be empty. I'm off to fight Werewolves and Clawbeasts, what does Aunt Bee need with a Fire Charm? I'll take continuity relative to the game rather than my world every time. I like shops where the same guy sells me weapons that I can see; I like seeing my characters moving about the landscape individually (to scale) along with whatever I'm going to fight in seamless battles that I can engage or disengage at will. I like character and weapon management that's actually rewarding, and bird people that set up item shops in scary bogs. I like dynamic collision in an RPG! And I like liking my characters, although Corcell is pushing it...

Most of all I want to be engaged like I was playing Phantasy Star 21 years ago, and along with all of the above, that's where Magnacarta 2 really shines. For me to spend 50 hours of my week in a virtual soap opera, I have to miss it when I'm not playing, and get the warm-fuzzy every time I hear the opening theme or music in the central hub. I have to care about what happens to the fake friends I'm spending my days feeding and outfitting to keep out of a Giant Angler's maw and it can't annoy me in any way. I want a game, not a simulation, and a story, not an encyclopedia on Big Bird. The story in Magnacarta 2 may seem a cliché at first (...amnesia) but this isn't your garden variety storytelling. It's a long slow wonderful burn. I must warn you however, there are some moments of genuine affection and maybe even the L word, between raining death from the sky and running your sword through the carcasses of large beasts and the decidedly wicked Northern Forces. Magnacarta 2 may also appear to lack the fidelity of a modern Final Fantasy or similarly gleaming JRPG. I can't argue with the gleaming part, but I will say that on occasion you might find sophistication where you least expect it...like that blocky RPG that redefined its generation not so long ago.

parting shot

Magnacarta 2 has all the spectacle, expanse, drama, combat, and nuance of an epic turn-based RPG, and none of the worn out conventions. SOFT-MAX's seamless real-time battle and field systems, great ensemble cast and boundless character development make all the difference.

In Mare years Celestine is barely a teenager... But her Ice Arrow's feel like they're all grown up.



PLAY INTERVIEW

Yoshihisa Kanesaka,
Producer of Magnacarta 2
Namco Bandai Games

play: How did the Magnacarta series come about? Does the namesake bear any relation to the historical document? Any reason in particular the game title has become one word?

Yoshihisa Kanesaka: Initially, the name Magnacarta was chosen as the title because of the word "Carta" which focuses on power. During the medieval English Civil War, the Magna Carta law charter was an important symbol for those who wanted to deny absolute power to the King. King John of England was bound by this law to proclaim certain rights to the common man and to accept that his will was bound by law and not absolute. This has been an important theme for all the Magnacarta games.

Even though there's no direct connection with Magna Carta: Tears of Blood, the core theme of star-crossed lovers in the throes of war and amnesia is echoed in Magnacarta 2. Is this the common ground in which all future games in the series will be rooted?

Definitely, we didn't want to stray too far from the main themes established from the Magnacarta series. But, ultimately fans and new gamer experiences will dictate how the series can and will evolve in the future. Fan feedback is very important to us and we take it very seriously.

Other similarities such as Cubes similar Tears' Communication Spheres, Kan and Kamond in lieu of Chi and Presents, Movement Modes etc., suggest a Final Fantasy-like series of consistent yet unrelated sequels (and perhaps spin-offs) bound by a core formula and character design. Wishful thinking on my part or is Magnacarta Korea's answer to Final Fantasy?

I would be lying if I said we didn't look at the Final Fantasy series at all when we were in the concept stages of Magnacarta 2's world and game engine, but we didn't conduct a straightforward comparison based on one popular game series. We are simply trying to create a game that provides a totally new battle engine and RPG gameplay experience on a next-gen gaming platform. As fans of the RPG genre, we looked at many series to gain inspiration for Magnacarta 2. We are flattered by your comparison but please do not make us out as rivals to Final Fantasy. Ha-ha.

Speaking of character design, did Hyung-Tae Kim find SOFTMAX or did SOFTMAX find him? How did he come to the project?

Hyung-Tae Kim was originally on staff at SOFTMAX for the original Magnacarta game. We were completely amazed by his art style and it was decided that Hyung-Tae Kim's talent



would be absolutely essential to creating a new Magnacarta game. So, we sought him out to bring him on board for this project. He is essential to our team and we included him in many aspects of the development process.

His designs give the series an air of both sophistication and originality. What's the process like converting his 2D art to 3D game characters? Is he involved in the transition?

Converting Hyung-Tae Kim's designs from 2D to 3D requires tremendous time and patience. The most time consuming is the facial models and facial animations. There is an extensive process involving the development team and myself in designing the faces and facial expressions by trial and error using the 2D illustrations as our source. Once we feel comfortable with our own translations of the characters, all designs are sent to Hyung-Tae Kim for his input and final approval. It is a very intensive process and we hope the characters come to life for you and translate well when you play the game.

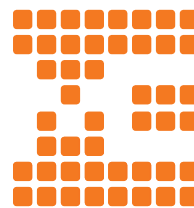
Is he involved as you develop the characters and story or partake in any facet of production?

Hyung-Tae Kim involvement is strictly with character designs of the game. Our internal team and SOFTMAX were responsible for the story and game mechanics.

What about the Trewa, Sentinels and other creature designs? The numerous monster and species throughout Magnacarta 2 are really creative. These are all designed in-house, correct?

The in-house SOFTMAX design team created

"Hyung-Tae Kim and SOFTMAX have a unique design ability that permeates throughout the Magnacarta world."



“Our primary aim with the control scheme was to give players easy control over their party in a real-time environment.”

enough without being intimidating and the seamless transitions and real-time aspects give the game a more adventurous feel while remaining a true RPG. How was it conceived? Was there a lot of trial and error?

While the battle system may appear daunting with a lot of party characters involved, after a short learning period the control scheme becomes very intuitive to players. Our primary aim with the control scheme was to give players easy control over their party in a real-time environment. We looked at this as a good opportunity to make the most of the next-gen system and present a new type of party battle system that breaks away from the traditional turn-based party management system. There were a lot of false starts when we were developing this system. We hope this system communicates the intricacies of the gameplay while giving players the feeling of extensive control over their party members.

Do you anticipate changing the battle system from game to game or sticking with this system and refining/adapting to the respective universe?

It's too early to say right now. There are already many "what if" scenarios and ideas for any follow-up Magnacarta games that might appear in the future.

Both Cartas have numerous intricate systems for weapon, skill, and status augmentation as well as field actions and item creation supported by a mission structure that promotes completing every side quest and really getting to know each system and member in your party. To a certain degree however, you let the player decide how deep he or she wants to delve. Is this to make the

the Sentinels, enemy characters, monsters, environments, towns, tools, and the tertiary characters. Hyung-Tae Kim's art is beautiful but please also give some appreciation to the talented SOFTMAX team for creating a wonderful and fascinating world that is rich with many layers.

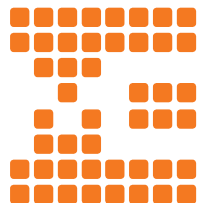
RPGs are such a massive undertaking and this one has many components. How big a team is involved?

There has been a consistent staff of 40 SOFTMAX employees working on Magnacarta 2 along with 10 Namco Bandai Games people.

With Magnacarta 2 you seem to have found the definitive real-time battle system. The Trinity Circle and Guarding techniques in Tears of Blood were unique and increasingly rewarding but the system overall was taxing and tricky to master. The Overdrive and Chain system, however, is just complex



Crocell





game accessible to a wider range of users? Could a less-detail oriented player get through the game with minimal character management and battle savvy? I utilized every system to its fullest and still found certain adversaries, such as Leviathan, very challenging...

Though control may seem complicated due to its unique intricacies and party member's activeness, actual play is segmented out to single members. With the simple control scheme of the player character and party AI controls, gameplay is very intuitive and accessible to hardcore and enthusiast RPG gamers. Also, we have a very detailed tutorial that teaches the basic controls and chain system that will get players into the game fairly quickly.

Tears of Blood was the game that hooked me on Korean game design and Magnacarta 2 has all of the telltale elements I've come to admire. You seem less concerned with plausibility and more with atmosphere and the overall experience, which is great. These are "games" after all. Is this by design or emblematic of Korean gaming culture in general?

In the field of console games, not online games, this game is very rare in Korean gaming culture. It represents a good deal of time and effort that SOFTMAX and NAMCO BANDAI Games have spent for the past few years. Hyung-Tae Kim and SOFTMAX have a unique design ability that permeates throughout the Magnacarta world.

Magnacarta 2 is a very organic, natural looking game. You seem very selective about where and how much bump mapping and shine to deploy. Is this strictly a design choice or also a performance issue given the size of the environments and the seamless nature of the battles and effects therein? I have to say that it's the product of great effort of SOFTMAX. They have a great attitude on never compromising their vision and also keeping on track with schedules. Their advanced technologies for RPGs that fully utilize the features of middleware lie in excellent loading, environment processing, and light source.

...Great score too. The theme that plays during the opening gameplay montage is wonderful as is the soundtrack on the whole. Was it scored in house?

The score was composed by Jang Sung-Woon, a very popular Korean musical composer. He is really good at creating enriching compositions based on movie themes. The music was mainly composed in-house in Jang Sung-Woon's studio and his process involved experimenting with physical instruments. If you like the music in Magnacarta 2, please listen to Jang Sung-Woon's other musical projects. They have an air of sophistication.

Well, it's a wonderful game full of momentous events and markedly beautiful, engaging characters. I've been playing Japanese RPGs since Phantasy Star but due to a serious lack of originality the current generation has rendered precious few worthy of the time one must invest. Not only is Magnacarta 2 one of them but it innovates in nearly every area I'd hoped for. Is there anything you'd like to add? Any message for all the RPG fans out there?

Finally, Magnacarta 2 will be released in the US. Please look forward to experiencing its unique themes of love and hatred. While many elements remain from the previous Magnacarta world, the intricate story and characters will evolve before you and provide an effervescent experience. [play](#)





The potential for the gory trifecta is still ridiculously exciting.

Aliens Vs. Predator

Will Rebellion's ambitious shooter rekindle the aging Alien franchise?

words Douglass C. Perry

It's been 10 years since *Aliens versus Predator* perfectly captured the chilling sound of a colonial marine's rapidly pulsing motion sensor. Sega has re-ignited the flames of the aging Alien IP, starting with the Gearbox FPS, *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (due in 2010), attempting but eventually canceling the Obsidian-based Alien RPG, and finally cutting to the chase with *Aliens Vs. Predator* (AVP).

What's striking is that even though the Alien universe is now nearly 30 years old, the potential for the gory trifecta is still ridiculously exciting. Set 30 years after *Alien 3*, AVP re-creates the tenor of James Cameron's ultimate alien movie, *Alien*. AVP is a first-person shooter that tells the original story of a colonized planet where Aliens, Predators, and humans confront one another. Gamers get to play from each creature's perspective in three independent, single-player campaigns, and to give the title ultimate replay value, Rebellion is packing in a 2-18 person multiplayer component.

As a Colonial Marine, you're the weakest of the three species. Capable of deploying machine gun turrets and armed with pulse rifles, including the grenade-launcher attachment, humans must learn to stick close together and pray. Flashlights, flares, and the (perfectly re-created) motion detector instantly take on great value, as xenomorphs and Predators can see in the dark. As is painfully clear, aural cues are keys to surviving jumping xenomorphs, which can strike from any surface, and stealth-suited Predators, which can leap great distances to attack. Good luck, rookie!

The Predator campaign is designed to capture the thrill of the hunt, giving gamers the tools to the original 1987 movie *Predator*, including camouflage technology, thermal vision, and a shoulder-mounted plasma blaster (with the three-dot laser). A stealthy attacker, the Predator's supernatural agility is conveyed with a great leaping ability. It's also equipped with a visual zoom and accompanying direction mic. The best

Bad, Bad Aliens

Prior to Rebellion's well-received *Aliens versus Predator* in 1999, the Amiga, Spectrum, Commodore 64, NES, Jaguar, PC, Apple, and PlayStation saw 20 *Alien/Predator* games. After that zenith, a slew of awful *Alien* and *Predator* sucked the life from the series again. The post-1999 list includes:

Aliens Versus Predator (Rebellion, FPS, 1999)
Alien vs. Predator: Extinction (Zono, RTS, 2003)
Predator: Concrete Jungle (Eurocom, action, 2005)
Aliens: Colonial Marines (EA, FPS, cancelled 2002)
Alien RPG (Obsidian, RPG, cancelled 2009)

part of being the Predator is that it's all done for sport: You'll collect heads (often with attached spines), useful for opening retinal security doors, and attachable for bragging rights to your waist.

The *Aliens* campaign is the most unusual and compelling. The xenomorphs' view is cast from a fish-eye perspective, and since this species can climb any surface with ease, you'll be able to track enemies from walls, trees, and upside down via ceilings. Stealth kills are particularly satisfying at night using the creature's natural night vision. But *Aliens* love up-close encounters, and you'll use your forearms, jaws, and tail to tear into enemies. Expect absolutely gory death animations ranging from face-munching attacks to body-piercing tail spearing.

It's going to be so much fun. [play](#)

It's going to be "game over, man!" for this poor marine sooner rather than later. Maybe he can build a fire and sing a couple songs.



MURAMASA

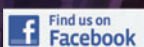
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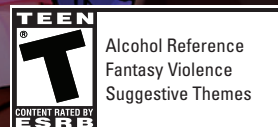
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Uncharted 2: Among Thieves

Naughty Dog takes motion capturing to the next level

words Casey Loe

For its ambitious sequel to the highly accomplished *Uncharted*, developer Naughty Dog spent even more time at Hollywood's famous motion-capture complex House of Moves to embolden the adventures of Drake to life in *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*. Amy Hennigan, creative director at Naughty Dog, estimates that between rehearsal days, mo-cap days, and stunt days, the game creators were on set for 50 days. The team was able to work with actors like Nolan North (Nathan Drake), Claudia Black (Chloe Frazer) and Emily Rose (Elena Fisher) for full performance capture for the first time.

"With Drake's Fortune, we shot on the main stage and we had mics but we ended up having to dub almost all of the audio for the game afterward because the sound wasn't accurate," said Hennigan. "On this game we used better mics and over 95% of the dialogue we shot on the soundstage sets will be featured in the game. This allowed the actors to perform on our sets both through actions and dialogue for a more cinematic feel."

In fact, the new House of Moves facility is three times as large as the old one and it



includes a new soundstage to keep up with the demand of performance capture in videogames. According to D.J. Howe, technical supervisor at the House of Moves, videogames are currently leading the way in performance capture. Howe previously worked on Hollywood computer-generated films like *Beowulf* and *Monster House*, so he knows what he's talking about.

"Now with games obviously being a bigger money maker gross-wise than movies, game developers really have the time and energy to put into making better quality performance capture than Hollywood today," said Howe. "We also find that we actually end up capturing a lot more motions that 10 years ago we couldn't do with games due to hardware restrictions."

According to Brian Rausch, vice president of production at House of Moves, videogames make up 60% to 70% of the motion-capture business with games requiring, on average, 25 to 30 days of mo-cap work.

"You could call games our breadwinner because there's just more work to do on a videogame because it's hours of stuff," said Brian Rausch, senior vice president of production at House of Moves. "Today, we're rehearsing for the *Uncharted 2* project and I think that the one thing about that game is that you really are following the story and it's a seamless transition from the storyline into the gameplay."

Because Naughty Dog was able to build rough sets like a metal-framed Jeep with stick shift on the soundstage and capture motion and audio, it opened up improvisation for the actors in the game.

"There's a film it quality to the game itself and like television, which also has a high turnaround of the scripts, the game allows us to interpret and improvise as we

move forward with the relationships that are occurring in the game," said Black.

While stunt actors were used for more of the mundane, repetitive actions in the game, actors like Rose did suit up and perform stunts for the game.

"I did stuff like rounding the corner with the gun and a lot of the jumping, like when we fell from a bridge or the jeep," said Rose. "I feel like if I ever had to shoot an action movie, I'm good. I got it. And I go around and show people pictures of me in my ping pong suit on my iPhone to prove what I did for this game."

North said that Hollywood director Gordon Hunt, who has a long resume of television and now game work, is able to focus the cast on these characters and leaves them have input into every scene.

"So you don't have people saying, 'Why are you discussing this scene so much. It's just a videogame,'" said North. "Just a videogame is becoming a thing of the past. There's no such thing. This is a quality production. We're not here to half-ass it. We want to make it the best it can be, and nobody more than me, because I'm the lead character."

At the end of the day, the advances in performance capture should play out on PlayStation 3s with a more immersive experience for the gamer.

"We're focusing on bigger, more spectacular set pieces that occur right in-game so the player is more attached to them," said Hennigan. "We want the story to be an emotional experience in the game, rather than just a passive experience through cut scenes. We want *Uncharted 2* to just suck you into this vibrant, slightly saturated, romantic adventure reality."

Thanks to advances in technology, the cast and crew of the game's story were able to add more input than ever before in this sequel. [play](#)

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Ratchet and Clank Future: A Crack in Time

If a stitch in time saves nine, does a crack in time kill ten?

words Heather Anne Campbell

Much has been made of Insomniac's love of great visuals. Reviews of the PS3 Ratchet and Clank game compared it to "playing Pixar," and celebrated the team's attempts to make *Toy Story*, *Monsters, Inc.*, and *Finding Nemo* an interactive experience. In their newest Ratchet game, *A Crack in Time*, Insomniac continues to pursue their visual ideal, to great effect, but are remaining conservative when it comes to the game itself. This is not a reinvention; it is an expansion.

To put it another way: just when Sonic was getting good, the development team dropped the series into a pit of poor choices. You don't have to worry about Ratchet falling into the same furry hole. The things that were good about Ratchet and Clank have stayed good, gotten better even. The things that are new are wise, but not brash. And the things that are bad ... well, what were those things again?

Play had an exclusive chance to fight through the first few levels of Insomniac's new title, as well as chat with writer TJ Fixman and project manager Brian Bernal.

Firstly, for those who may have missed the most recent Ratchet games, the title starts with a recap interview with Captain Qwark during the installation to the PS3 hard-drive. Not only is this a great way to spend your patient minutes while *A Crack in Time* optimizes,

As they get closer to finding each other, they're going to find out that they each have their own destiny, and it may not necessarily be with each other.



but it provides forgetful gamers with an doorway into the complicated story of the series.

We tried to make this a stand-alone story. There are little things in the background that you might appreciate more if you're a fan of the story—you might be like, 'Oh, I remember that character,' but it's nothing that will make a new player feel lost, says Fixman.

That's not to say this is just Ratchet and Clank: Anecdote. Fixman says that the collaborative effort gave him some goals for the story of *A Crack in Time*.

We wanted Time to be a big part [of this game], and Ratchet's past to be a big part of it, he says. Additionally, This will be a more Clank-centric game than what we've done before.

From what we saw, both in our most recent demo and our preview at E3, the focus on Clank means a focus on time-based puzzle-play. Recalling the chrono-centric game-play of *Braid*, Clank can record actions for short periods of time and then replay them in the present, assisting his future self through puzzles by planning for them in the past. Clank also deploys time-bombs, which slow down a small section of space, not unlike *Braid*'s ring. Whether these ideas were directly influenced by *Braid* is not important; the similarity is just one of description.

Pixar remains, however, a conceptual counsel on the games.

One of the traits of Pixar that we really look up to is the amount of heart they're able to put into their stories, says Fixman. I think there's definitely room in the Ratchet universe for that kind of feel. People love the characters, they love the canon; they equate Ratchet with Saturday morning cartoons.

We tried to create, you know, the funny environment,

but we also wanted people to feel for the characters."

Adds Bernal, "We've always been hit or miss on the emotions, especially on the PS2 games. We started to hit it on the PS3, but this has been, all project-long, a huge point for us. Focusing on heart.

"There's a lot more emotion, more heart-felt feelings, in this game than in the previous titles."

Fixman continues, "The great thing about *Up* was this sort of melancholy; the way it started out, and then we saw the silver lining, starting anew. These are the kinds of things you'll see in Ratchet and Clank. There are some very bittersweet moments. Ratchet and Clank have been together a long time; we've been making games for a while. They've been on numerous adventures.

"But do these two galactic adventurers really belong together? As they get closer to finding each other, they're going to find out that they each have their own destiny, and it may not necessarily be with each other."

There's still plenty of fun to be found in *A Crack in Time*. Space combat plays a bigger role than in previous R&C games, and interstellar travel provides an open-world hub in-between storied sections. Side Quests are activated by landing your ship on planetoids and taking on the challenges presented by their inhabitants, and there's a lot of space-craft to blast on the way. All of the other Ratchet staples, from item collection to grinding, will be here as well.

It's just, hopefully, tethered to a little more heart.

A demo for the upcoming game will be released early October, with the game close on its heels. play

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System: X360/PS3/PC **Developer:** Codemasters **Publisher:** Codemasters **Available:** October 6

Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising

War isn't a game

Releasing a modern military-themed FPS within a month of Activision's latest Call of Duty entry might sound suicidal, but Codemasters' latest entry in their popular combat sim series isn't aimed at those head-shot-hunting yahoos. In fact, next to Dragon Rising's strategy-driven realism, Modern Warfare looks like the Michael Bay-ified version of war. That means fewer flashy set pieces and scripted events, and more chances for you to die an inglorious death from a single gunshot wound.

If you believe regenerating health bars and conveniently-placed rocket launchers are for babies, then you'll want to suit-up for Dragon Rising's ultra-realistic take on modern warfare. A few minutes—and several “mission failed” screens—into my demo, I was quickly reminded that I wasn't protected by some impenetrable armor dreamed up by a Tom Clancy-wannabe; I learned to watch my ammo counts, monitor my squads' health, and not underestimate the power of planning and issuing commands. Radial menus offer far more than the usual “breach, flank, and follow” commands, giving gamepad G.I.s a dizzying amount

Fewer set pieces, more chances for you to die an inglorious death.

of tactical options. The “orders” radial branches into Fire, Movement, Offense, and Defense radials, while selecting “tactical” opens options for Formations, ROE, and Spread.

The dedicated realism carries over to the visuals as well. Explosions and smoke can turn the tide of battle, your squads' gear visibly changes depending on what they're carrying, and over 100 real-world weapons and vehicles are featured in the campaign and multi-player modes. If I lost you at “radial menus,” then you may want to hop on a snowmobile dual-wielding Uzis, of course, in one of those other modern military shooters. However, if you want to tax your brain as often as your trigger finger, Dragon Rising is looking for new recruits.

Matt Cabral

System: Wii **Developer:** AQ Interactive / feelplus **Publisher:** XSEED Games **Available:** October 13

Ju-on: The Grudge

Ju-only live once

The Wii sure is the happening place to be for horror games as of late, with Cursed Mountain hitting stores as I write this, the on-rails shooter duo Dead Space Extraction and Resident Evil: Darkside Chronicles getting ready to fight it out soon, and last but not least Silent Hill: Shattered Memories preparing to send us into a deep freeze before winter even officially arrives.

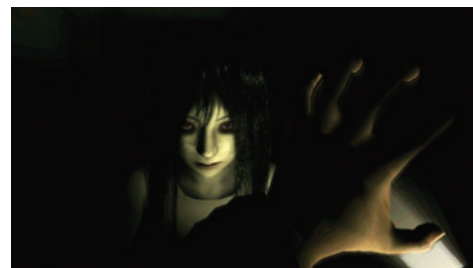
With the market so crowded with Wii titles ready to scare us into submission, the best thing Ju-on: The Grudge could do is offer up an experience unique and different enough that it won't get lost among the flood of freaky frights. Good thing then that that is exactly what the game indeed intends to do.

Actually, Ju-on isn't so much a game as it is an experience. After picking your preferred character sex and astrological sign, you'll have to navigate your way through a number of locations ranging from a rusting warehouse to the requisite shadowy hospital. Exploration is done from a first-person perspective—where your Wii remote not only directly controls your movement, but also the use of your flashlight—and while you'll come across some

Ju-on isn't so much a game as an experience.

rudimentary puzzles and easily-avoidable “monsters,” that exploration itself is what Ju-on is all about. The game is being billed as a “Haunted House Simulator”—a fitting description, as the real challenge comes in seeing if you can bravely push on until the end.

It's a very intriguing concept, one that will carry or curse the game depending on how the idea holds up through the entirety of its chapters. **Eric L. Patterson**



What the hell happened here?





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Left 4 Dead 2

Autopsy of the Infected

words Mike Griffin

...gruesome new damage and dismemberment effects, leaving heaps of shorn limbs.

Death toll

I've played Left 4 Dead a lot. At the time of this writing, according to my Steam stats, I've completed 518 games of L4D and killed over 36,000 Infected. In my 215 hours of gameplay I've clocked a pace of 168 kills per hour. I adore cracking the auto-shotgun, and it accounts for 91% of my kills, after plugging mutants with over 97,000 shots. My goodness, I'm a mass murderer. I've also revived teammates over twenty times per map on Expert, so I'm doing my part to keep the co-op party rolling. So is Valve. Breaking from its history of long development times, the venerable developer is confidently preparing a greatly enhanced sequel for release on November 17. We'll encounter new characters, themes and technology in Left 4 Dead 2's larger, more ambitious campaigns across recently-infected US geography.

First-class trip to the South

It's like another Civil War has broken out in Left 4 Dead 2, as the North invades the South. This invasion is carried on the winds, however, and it fights with weapons of disease, mutation and inhuman rage. From Georgia to Louisiana, stomping through Savannah and into the heart of New Orleans, the Infected propagate the pandemic and tear apart those who have yet to succumb. The region was totally unprepared for this astronomic rate of infection and the insane violence that ensued. Yes, we can draw parallels to the catastrophe and anarchy of horrible real world events in the area, but these are not the themes of L4D 2's fiction.

Aesthetically, it's a wonderful selection of environments for exploring new campaigns (much larger than the original) in the next phase of this zombie apocalypse. Ripe for classic horror movie scenes: shambling crowds on the front lawn of a grand, abandoned Mississippi mansion, flanked by early 20th century gravestones; the burning ruins of a razed trailer park; a big annual carnival, now a circus of carnage; and urban chaos in the French Quarter, as slaving infected tourists hunt for souvenirs of flesh among the discarded vehicles lining the streets. And this time our Survivors fight through hot climates, often under sunny skies.

Unlike the first four survivors, Bill, Francis, Louis and Zoey, who formed up already semi-battle hardened against the horde, our new party of four in L4D 2 is only now beginning to learn the ropes as we meet them, and they meet each other—right after the Infected begin to ravage the South. We watch as Coach, high school football maestro; Nick, unrepentant gambler; Rochelle, TV news producer; and Ellis, the young mechanic, evolve and adapt to the new crisis. Left 4 Dead players loved the short bursts of dialogue between characters, and the sequel will place a greater emphasis on these conversations



as a way to communicate the Survivors' personalities and storyline—often through their reaction to the events and gameplay at hand.

A Director motivates the actors

We all had our favorite hold up spots in Left 4 Dead, whether it was backtracking to the safe house at the Construction Site, inside the delivery van near the Gas Station, or that great stairwell near the radio (two at the top door, two at the bottom) on the Rooftop finale. It was interesting to see Valve's deconstruction of these options in the Survival mode (returning in the sequel), as the developer recognized tactical trends and altered almost every sweet spot, in each case making the option more dangerous and demanding greater player mobility between waves. The culmination of this effort to diminish the use of low-risk hold up strategies arrives in Left 4 Dead 2's greatly enhanced AI Director. Essentially, Valve looked at the reliance on these hold up strategies and asked, "How can we keep players moving?"

In a design stroke that calls to mind the eerily morphing streets and buildings of Alex Proyas' 1998 cult hit, *Dark City*, the AI Director has been given license to alter the shape of the game world around the players, on-the-fly. Unlike the residents of *Dark City*, Left 4 Dead 2 players won't be snoozing through the machinations of this environmental facelift; they will be the catalyst for it. The AI Director monitors gameplay, accruing algorithms of location, players' condition, relative ammo supply, time of day, and atmospheric phenomena. Where the Infected used to play the lead dynamic role, bringing chaos to static level routes, now the environment itself shares top billing.

Players will have to pick up the pace, run and gun, as walls and obstacles are dynamically—behind-the-scenes—moved into place to alter pathways and create urgent gauntlets. Where the original had you moving between campaign checkpoints with only minor deviations, L4D 2's AI Director orchestrates self-contained alternate routes and scenarios to test players, reacting to them and keeping them guessing. Time of day and world lighting will also change dramatically, and weather effects like coastal rain storms will roll in. We all know how panic-inducing lighting and atmospheric conditions are in Left 4 Dead's style of gameplay, and how its creatures will take advantage of said conditions to beat you senseless.

Stop clowning around

Something I wanted in Left 4 Dead, probably because I'm a big George Romero fan, is elite editions of standard Infected: the slightly more powerful and unique-looking zombies that stand out as alpha mutants within the fodder. We'll have them in L4D 2, and in a clever stroke of thematic design they will be campaign-specific. As you see on these pages, the Dark Carnival campaign will feature unique clown-faced Infected to mow down, always an unsettling and entertaining villain in modern horror. The Parish campaign has frightening Infected in Hazmat suits, the iconic yellow costume apparently not enough to resist this particular outbreak. It's that ominous inference, and the question of what remains inside the suit, that makes this one especially creepy. The Swamp Fever campaign introduces ghastly mudmen Infected, prowling bog people formed of muck and flesh that blend right into the dark woods.

These unique Infected are more about theme and diversity, unlike their game-changing brethren, the Special Infected. We've all come to love and hate the small cast of Specials from the first game, the Hunter, Boomer, Smoker, Witch and Tank. As



the contagion headed South it evolved into other genetic strains of Specials and introduced new behavior to the existing ones. The new Spitter spews disgusting toxic puddles that must be avoided at all cost, while the Charger rumbles into players, using one massive arm to scatter them like bowling pins. In *simpatico* with Valve's new efforts to curb "hold up" style tactics, both of these new Specials emphasize player movement (run away *now* or die) in the way that only the Tank was able to do. You'll also be running from the Wandering Witch, the upgraded daytime-roaming edition of everyone's favorite weeping banshee. Perhaps most intriguing (especially for *Versus* model) is the Jockey, a mad little puppet master that can hop on your back and literally pull your strings—temporarily controlling your every move.

The Source of carnage

The last time we explored the Source Engine was just before Left 4 Dead, and we were talking about new upgrades to dynamic lighting and complex animation blending, the magic that makes the zombies look great as they navigate obstacles and lean into corners. The Source renderer has improved yet again in Left 4 Dead 2, with more of the destructibility and physics fun we enjoyed in the original, great contact effects for new ammo types like explosive and incendiary rounds, and skull-denting deformation and body chopping.

Yes, Left 4 Dead 2 introduces a splendid new melee game to accompany its enhanced arsenal of high-caliber pistols, scoped assault rifles and silenced SMGs. After a summer of playing a Berserker in *Killing Floor*, Tripwire's fun little co-op shooter, and grinding zombies to a pulp with a chainsaw, I'm dying to test my melee capabilities with the new chainsaw in L4D 2. As well as the frying pan, fire axe, and bats in both baseball and cricket flavors. Like guns and bombs, these and more melee weapons will benefit from gruesome new damage and dismemberment effects, leaving heaps of shorn limbs and bashed-in bones in their wake.

A legacy to honor

Left 4 Dead 2 is the fastest turn-around for a sequel in Valve's history (one year), and that has some people worried. I am not one of these people. Valve wouldn't be releasing this game on November 17 if it wasn't good to go, because the company has never launched with an undercooked product. As for the question

about it cannibalizing the original, this seems moot given the team's pledge to unique and shared updates for both games. On the PC side, there's some concern from the L4D modding community, as the scene is only now hitting its stride. Valve solves this too, as modders can import their L4D campaigns directly into the sequel's authoring tools and re-compile them—adding, if they choose, new content and expanded AI Director mischief. There appears to be plenty of value in the box. In a shrinking holiday release line-up, Left 4 Dead 2 is likely to be one of the safest bets.

Brain burgers

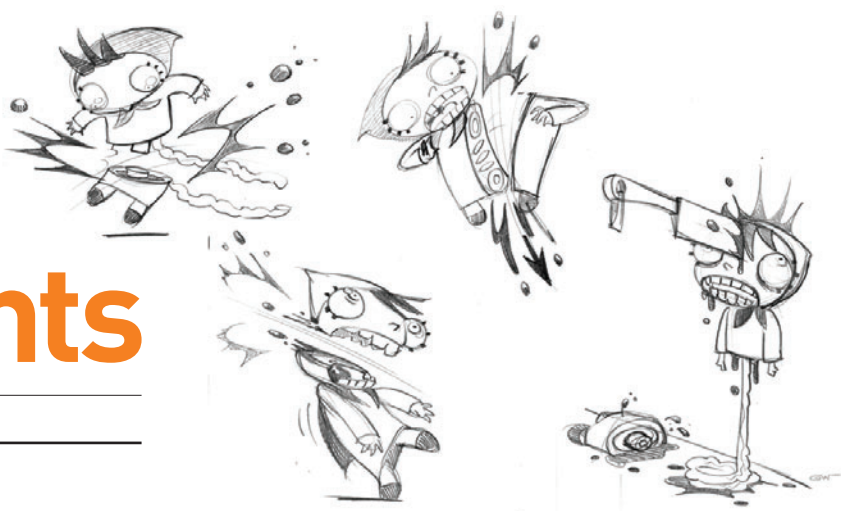
Wonderful detail and gore near the fairgrounds, as Rochelle, Coach, and Ellis stomp through discarded craniums and fast food in the parking lot.



Fairytale Fights

Not quite what you remember...

words Brady Fiechter



Papa Bear is acting bartender for today, serving his delicious adult beverages behind his woodsy bar. No one knows who's to blame, but Goldie Lox is passed out on her bed, clearly in need of some water and aspirin. Is this a case of overzealous partying, or is everyone a little depressed that the lumberjacks have stolen the porridge?

And what's the deal with the lumberjacks assuming the role of evildoers? "Often times lumberjacks are heroes," points out Fairytale Fights' senior art director Andre van Rooijen, "but we flip that around here and make them into the bad guys. They are working for the Candy Witch, the famous one trapped in Hansel and Gretl. In the original story, she had the house made of candy, but here she has this castle with a factory inside."

In Fairytale Fights, a twisted take on classic fairy tales that's been filtered through a lens of fighting and platforming, nothing much happens as you remember it as a child—unless you had a rather aggressive imagination. "We set out to create a familiar base on which to place our contradictions," adds lead concept artist Gerrit Willemse. "Everybody knows Red Riding Hood, everybody knows Hansel and Gretl, we just went with it from that base. Make something new again. All these characters are recognizable somehow. But who would have thought they were Siamese twins? In the original story they get captured by the Candy Witch. There's such a wealth of well-known narrative, and we want to play with those expectations, play with the minds of the players."

Inside the candy castle, a bright and cheery façade invites the warm, initial smile on your face, quickly morphing into a winced chuckle as you come across poor little children desperately licking the candy floor. The voracious children become increasingly plumper as the area flows deeper into the dungeon keep of the castle, where the most unlucky of the captives get processed in what looks to be giant vats of butter.

"That was actually my favorite level design, the candy castle," says van Rooijen. "We wanted to make it look like a big carnival; it's all nice and



good and sweet, but we wanted to make the rides dangerous. There had to be traps for the kids. We came up with hundreds of ideas, some of them just didn't make it."

One idea that did make it was a treacherous Ferris wheel that spills an acid-like liquid out of its gondolas while you try and jump to safety and unload on the other side. Various hazards abound in Fairytale Fights, from spinning buzz saws and collapsing platforms to cavernous drops and spiked mechanical cat paws that slam down from the walls. Dramatically different in tone

and structure, each level offers its own brand of themed obstacles. "If we just stuck with the hack and slash, there is a threat of it becoming too repetitive," says executive producer Martin Janse. "When we did the first prototype on the level design, we were playing around with what is really fun; after a short while, it's just not that interesting any more to fight around arenas. It's fun, jumping over objects, pushing an enemy off a cliff. Or for example, with the cat claws, you can lead enemies into the cat claws and hope they get sliced up. There's a much wider variation, even different

I'll have gore, with a double helping of blood on the side, please.

We want to play with those expectations, play with the minds of the players.



The hooks are fine, but put them in the background where it's subtle and creepy but not so awful.



ways of killing enemies, when you introduce these platforming elements."

Some levels will focus more on action and give you a breather from environmental treachery, but there's always something here to embellish the sense of being in a dangerous world that's not the most welcoming fairy tale. "And I think it really helps skilled players to stand out more," adds managing director Olivier Lhermite. "You'll have the satisfaction of the skilled player getting through a bit faster and more efficiently. Maybe even betray their friends when they finally make it safely to the other side of a hazard. And because we don't have a game over, we're allowed to get a little more gruesome with the player."

Fairytale Fights is gruesome indeed, but its depiction of bloody death and dismemberment is not meant to be perverse or sadistic. "One day our modeler came to me, he said, 'I want to put these kids on hooks, maybe I can put a hook in his ass and in his teeth and it looks really painful,'" says van Rooijen. "And I said, 'no, no, that's going too far. The hooks are fine, but put them in the background where it's subtle and creepy but not so awful.'"

But bloody—yes, Fairytale Fights is a bloodbath. Blood drips from trees and surfaces, covers the landscape and everyone in it ("That's the beauty of the volumetric system," says van Rooijen. "It sticks to everything.") If enough blood pools on the ground, you can skate around as if on a thick sheet of winter ice. To get the tap flowing, you begin by unleashing combos with one of the 140-odd weapons you'll find throughout the game. Grab a flute or mailbox or an axe or singing sword—every level offers something new—and start chopping that lumberjack into pieces. You can also grab potions, which explode into screen-size storms like fire, acid, and poison attacks. If you decide to go hand-to-hand and get in just the right shot, a picture-in-picture window pops up, giving you a close up of real-time bone breaking. With a weapon in hand, broken bones give way to sliced body parts. Using the right analog stick to initiate the basic attacks, you'll also use this input to guide your weapon anywhere you like along the enemy's body, spilling out their brain, leaving parts behind, all coming down to where you leave the cut. The central idea is that the analog stick is essentially mimicking the motions of your hand



for dynamic precision. Build the “glory meter” with skilled play and you can unleash the glory attack, slowing things down and giving you a more open door for the kill.

“I still see new slices; I cannot predict what I’m doing,” says Lhermite. “You have the general direction with the stick, but is an enemy going to lose an ear or part of his face, or do you just cut him right through? We feel like with animation, you get used to it quickly, after 10 or 15 times you’ve seen it and it’s no surprise.”

The consensus is that no one has ever really depicted a damage system like this in true real time, and furthermore, implementing an attack system with the right analog stick is rare in its own right. “Yeah, we struggled with this,” says Lhermite. “We did a lot of research. Internally everyone wanted something a little different. But in the end we came up with the full use of the analog stick, it’s really the nicest feeling. We wanted to show off that, for example, you can slice diagonally. That’s only possible with the analog. The button didn’t communicate that feeling of slicing we needed. And obviously even with the analog stick control, we worked with a lot of different ideas. But we settled on what we wanted pretty early on. We did want to keep it simple. We got a little overly complicated, but then decided on keeping... look at Super Mario 64 for example. The controls aren’t complex, but you have so much fun with the world.”

There’s no final word yet how many players will be able to join in online, but locally you can enjoy the single-player campaign with three friends, assuming the roles of Little Red Riding Hood, Beanstalk Jack, Snow White, and the Naked Emperor. Battle arenas are also being included along with forthcoming downloadable content. In the central story mode, the basic idea is to reclaim your lost fame in the fairytale universe, collecting money to pay the statue builder to erect a shiny new monument in your honor. A devious punk named Little Boy Tailor appears to be the cause of all the trouble, mucking up the fairy tales of the land. For example, you’ll see him rescuing grandma from the wolves and ruining Little Red Riding Hood’s chance of renown. The Giant is somehow involved as well: what better way to prove you aren’t a washed up hero by felling this great beast?

“The giant levels are really great” offers





Willemse. “You start with the beanstalk and you go to the kid’s room, into the hallway and into the kitchen. I really like the kid’s room the best. We tried to make little stories in each screen. This kid is collecting things from the human world and using it as his toys. So he’s making toy boats from the boats in the human world. He has this butterfly board, and he pins down humans on it. Every screen has another little story about how he made objects, how he made toys from the human world. The big story is of course that he collects princesses. The goal is to rescue the princess, and you see him smacking them together, throwing them at you, because he really thinks he’s just playing with toys.”

Every screen has another little story about how he made objects, how he made toys from the human world.



The Giant level was easily my favorite of the areas I saw as well, showcasing the nifty sense of scale and some of the more interesting visual and platforming devices. Once you get into the kitchen, you must navigate the wife’s cooking space, eventually avoiding her mammoth canning jars as they pound down onto a table, precariously inviting you to jump on the lid and get launched up to the next level and inevitable boss battle—which ends in someone getting ground up, spit out or generally sliced up.

With the choice of a deep perspective framing the smaller characters, even more little details and references can be packed in the corners, building a little world. “If you want to tell a story during the level, how can you tell that through visual motions and actions? That was the challenge,” says Willemse. “There’s a lot of things going on in the background and I don’t think everyone is going to pick up all these details, especially if you’re focused on all the action in the foreground. We got to a point where it came down to, how much can we cram into the level visually?”

I like that the imagery seems to make sense, tells a story of its own. “In a lot of games, you’ll see things like a gear just stuck in a wall,” says van Rooijen. “You wonder why there are these random objects sometimes placed in strange places. Is there a machine behind it or something? If you put just a little more logic behind it, pay more attention to the context, you can make it look like it would actually work and you get much stronger reactions from the player.”

“We actually had catapults in the game at one time,” says Willemse. “They actually worked. We had them set up so that the player could pull them around, but the idea was eventually canceled. But we did put them in the background and you’ll see that they are fully functional.”

Calling Fairytale Fights a “cartoon” game is an easy choice, but what does that really mean?

“Yeah, we really try to deviate from the usual cartoon style days nowadays, what people are used to,” says van Rooijen. “Maybe add some more trendy design feel to it. So as a main reference point we chose the designer toy market. They really nailed down original ideas, weird character designs, cool visuals. I’ve always had the urge to make things really weird.”

“Back in the Nintendo 64 days, the cartoon games were obviously much more prevalent,” adds lead programmer Erik Bastianen. “The style was often dictated by the technology available at the time. Now people expect detail and realism, and since we’re not offering that, we really have to offer something quite different that isn’t just another cartoon game. Of course the detail is a huge initiative, and it’s just eating framerate [laughs.] That really became a technical challenge as we filled so much onto the screen; there’s so much going on. And on top of that, the shaders were very unique for us. We wanted to have really smooth surfaces, but there had to be something in exchange for that that makes the world really rich and beautiful. So experimenting with different shaders, we came up with the idea that we wanted a clay look to the entire game, so we started doing research into that. We even got Play Doh in and started building off that. The shaders went through several iterations to get to that clay texture we were looking for. But it turned out that the whole current shader technology is so much easier to create realistic detail things than a clean looking cartoon. So in that respect it has been a challenge.” [play](#)

Splatterhouse

Re-animating the Horror

Namco re-envisioning the '80s cult brawler

words Douglass C. Perry

Splatterhouse is about dragging the player down the path of brutality...This isn't Fable.

We're a long, long way from TurboGrafx 16 blood.

I am sitting in the Santa Clara office of Namco Bandai with five producers who are deeply, fiercely engrossed in expressing the fine distinctions between blood viscosities, brain fluid, and pus-filled blisters. I've seen my share of gore flicks, having grown up with *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, and *The Exorcist*, but there was never much intellectual discussion about it.

Today is different. Over the course of a four-hour session, I am thrown into Namco's new action game, *Splatterhouse*, a gory, modern-day re-envisioning of the 1980s arcade brawler. It's about thirty minutes into the session when

Producer Mike Bocchieri says something that resonates beyond the nuances of thin and thick blood.

"*Splatterhouse* is about dragging the player down the path of brutality," says Bocchieri. "This isn't *Fable*; *Splatterhouse* is not about choice. It's about brutality. I personally feel that after a half hour of playing, you're going to want to put the game down for a minute because you're going to feel a little dirty."

Namco is more than excited about the blood and gore in *Splatterhouse*. The M-rated third-person beat-'em-up, set to release sometime near the middle of 2010, originates from the company's arcade roots. As the day session progresses, I learn how important this title is for the growth of the worldwide game maker. *Splatterhouse* is a symbol for Namco's evolution. It bridges the Japanese headquarters with the Western studios developing it, a process that's involved many personnel and high-level meetings. It's Namco's stab at forging a "new" IP in the rather unimaginative console landscape of 2009. And it's a keystone for the worldwide company as they identify the cultural differences between Japanese and Western horror sensibilities, and bridge them.

School of Horror

On the surface there is little doubt about where *Splatterhouse*'s sensibilities lie. The original coin-op game hit Japanese arcades in 1988 (1989 in North America) and followed the common side-scrolling action formula and time-based mechanics of the time. Gamers played the role of Rick, a teenager who discovered a magic mask that gave him super





Splatterhouse was one of the first coin-op games to truly explore the Western theme of horror.

powers to chop, hack, beat, and splatter anyone or anything that stood in his way. The original "story" was essentially an 8-second long cutscene of Rick putting on the mask and transforming into a supernaturally powered human who would make former body builder Arnold Schwarzenegger cringe with jealousy.

Japanese arcade makers cranked out sequels and movie-related one-offs, occasionally exploring new variations and different themes. Namco's *Splatterhouse* was one of the first coin-op games to truly explore the Western theme of horror, which for the time, was different because it was so violent. *Splatterhouse* hit the Turbo Grafx-16 and PC Engine in 1990 and for 20 years remained the only teen-rated TurboGrafx-16 game in North America. It was followed by two sequels, both on Sega Genesis.

There is a deep irony to its origins. The game's original designer, Atsuhiko Hayakawa, created the game with Western-themed movies as their influence. Namco's original team cites Peter Jackson's *Dead Alive*, *Evil Dead*, and *Friday the 13th* as its main influences. One glance at transformed Rick and it's clear *Friday the 13th* influenced the original game's look, which altered in shape and color of the mask for obvious legal reasons.

Action, with a Side of Story

Arcade games never needed a lot of story. They set up simple premises that throw gamers straight into the action. That doesn't work as well for today's crowds. In re-imagining *Splatterhouse* into a modern console game, Namco has fleshed out the characters, environments, and the backstory, throwing in H.P. Lovecraft instances and given reason, motive, and intrigue to an arcade game that offered nothing more than an outline of a story.

The game starts simply enough. Two teenage college students, Rick and Jenifer, walk toward an old mansion. Rick accompanies Jenifer (voiced over by Shanelle Gray, the voice from the Wendy commercials), who is a college student working for her school newspaper. She has an interview appointment with the necrobiologist Dr. West at his mansion. Gamers will see the story told in bits and pieces over the course of the game, but they'll learn that upon arrival to the mansion, Dr. West has different plans than just an "interview." When the doctor arrives he instantly commands his fiendish henchmen to kill Rick and take Jenifer, who bears a striking resemblance to the doctor's former wife.

Lying in a pool of his own blood and nearing death, Rick hears a voice. In the brief struggle with West's fiends, he knocked over several statues in the center of the room, from which one opened, revealing an ancient mask. The



STUDIO SWITCHEROO

Splatterhouse was green-lit on January 1, 2007, and Namco originally tapped Bottlerocket Entertainment, whose work previously included *The Mark of Kri* and its sequel, to develop it. While an official press release was not issued, Namco pulled development from the Bottlerocket in February 2009 and took it in-house. Currently, a smaller internal team at Namco's Santa Clara office and the larger Carlsbad team, "Namco South" (which opened in March 2009), handle development. Additionally, several members of Namco's

Afro Samurai team have been tapped for the project.

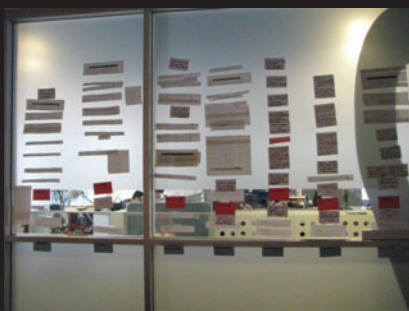
"When we took the game in-house we re-assessed everything, re-evaluated the core mechanics, and worked on making the game truer to its roots," said Nigel Cook, senior producer.

The list of issues Namco is fixing includes the game's combat, which was slow-paced. It also offered quick-time events (QTEs) that distanced gamers from the game's original visceral nature. "We're getting rid of the QTEs," said Producer Mike Bocchieri. "You were so focused on pressing buttons while playing that you weren't looking at the screen anymore."

Furthermore, enemies such as Biggyman—a fan favorite boss from the original coin-op—didn't turn out the way the team imagined him. "Six months ago, Biggyman was taller, lumbering,

with duct tape on his head," said Cook. "We were able to redesign him to be closer to the original."

Namco's internal team made the game faster. It quickened Rick's run cycle, shortening his animations and making his responsiveness better. It quickened up slow, plodding enemies to keep pace with Rick. And it deepened Rick's combo tree, expanding three-string combos to five-string combos.



A lot of thought and effort went into this gore.



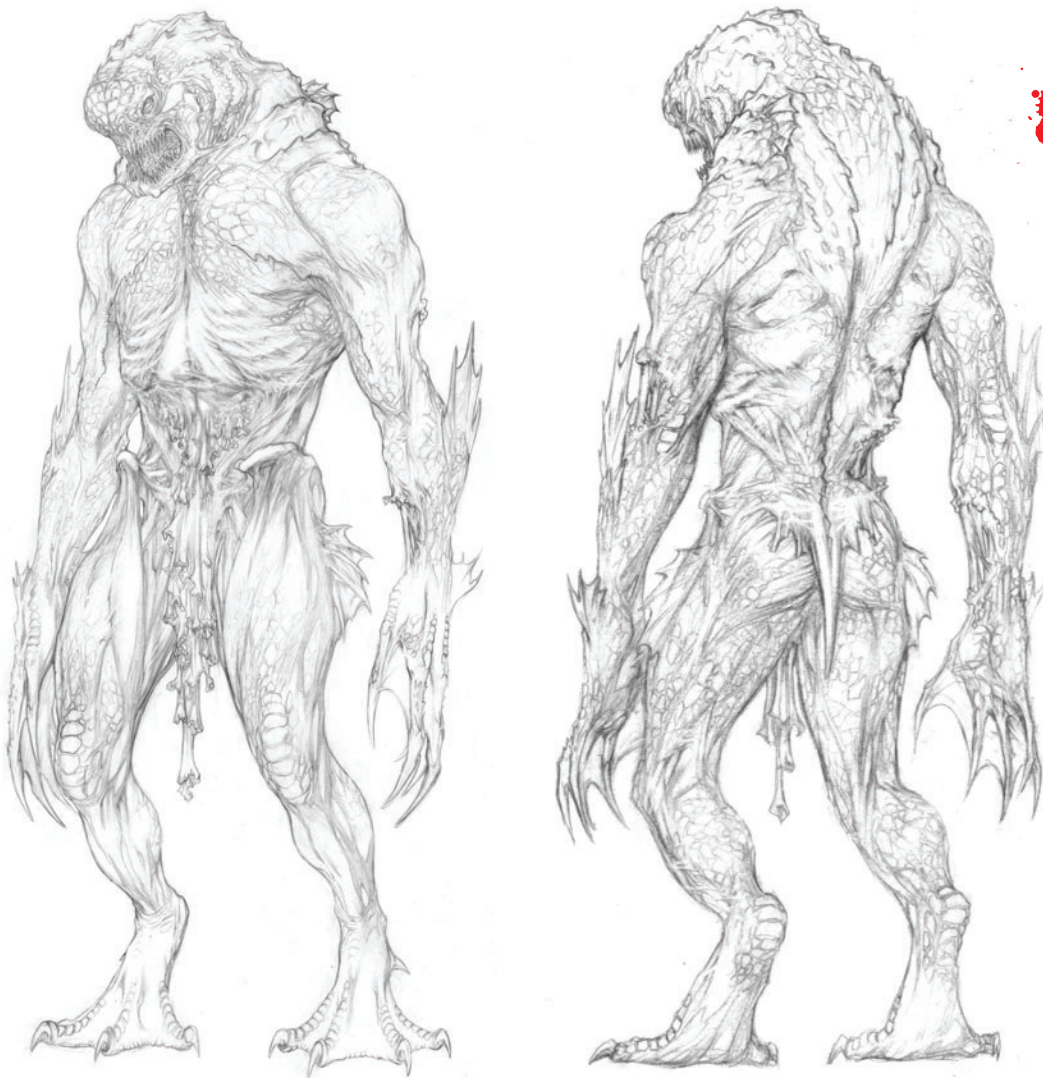
mask again speaks to Rick. "She doesn't have to die, Rick. You can save her...WE can save her...If you put me on."

Forgoing judgment, the teenager places the mask on his face, transforming him in seconds from a skinny teenager into a supernaturally muscle-bound killing machine. He rips a 2X4 off the wall and tromps through the house to save Jennifer.

"The original story was pretty sparse, but they gave us a really good outline to build from," explained Mark Brown, associate producer. "The character of Dr. West was basically alluded to in the first game, but we wanted a villain in this game so we expanded on him, and we put a lot of history in West Mansion and the creatures there"

Along with the mansion, which is a "character" on its own, says Brown, the Mask becomes a tool for telling the story. The Mask reveals how it was originally a human magically locked up in the Mask thousands of years ago (for reasons to be revealed later), and is now bent on revenge. The Mask is voiced over by Jim Cummings (*Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*), who perfectly infuses it with an unhinged, gravelly tone. The conversations between Rick (voiced over by Josh Keaton of *The Spectacular Spider Man* cartoon series) and the Mask reach several tense moments over the course of the game, and present one of its thematic dualities: The Mask constantly manipulates Rick into profound violence, and Rick struggles against it to stay human.





A typical meal in the Splatterhouse.

"Ultimately, the story of Splatterhouse is a psychological one," explains Bocchieri. "We feel the psychological aspect is specifically personified by Rick, the innocent teenager, and the Mask, a demonic other-worldly id, that wants revenge for being trapped inside this mask. This being propels Rick forward through the course of the action, turning Rick into a killing machine for the purposes of his own vengeance. It's a horror story in the tradition of horror films, which derive from morality plays written in the Middle Ages."

Location, Location, Location

Players will explore a significant bit of real estate in Splatterhouse. The castle, re-designed from the original arcade game, is the first and biggest area to explore. But there is also a vast network of catacombs underneath it, estate grounds surrounding the mansion, and a shanty town (which culminates in a boss fight with BiggyMan, a boss from the original arcade game) among other places. Because the team had to expand the game's geography, it's added portals to help Rick travel from one place to the next.

The Mask, however, dictates the end destination of the portals, not Rick. Their unpredictable nature often brings him to different places and different times as well, including a Louisiana carnival built specifically to inject the game with a surreal carnival vibe. Visiting several of the team members at their desks, I saw one designer show off an early pass on the carnival level packed with zombie clowns. Rick can use the carnival's various booths, such as shooting galleries and water dunking booth, to perform kills specific to that level. "This carnival section is a really fun spot, but it's not just thrown in for looks," explains Cook. "It specifically enhances the kind of brutal, and in this instance, surreal violence that Rick is capable of."

Namco keenly understands the strengths and weaknesses of designing a brawler in 2009. On the one hand, Splatterhouse provides instant action, but what happens when today's sophisticated player runs through the basic moves and grows bored? The levels are split up with different objectives, like the Carnival level, and there is even a touch of platforming. One section I played had me jumping from unstable stalactites and stalagmites over a pit. If I fell, I'd have to finish off a round of demons before finding a path back to the top.

In the hands-on demo, I played through the third level, the West Mansion Catacombs, an underground set of small caverns connected by tunnels. The settings are predictably dark and dripping with questionable liquids, and I quickly realize the Catacomb design bears a not-so-subtle resemblance to living organs. In one room Rick must use a giant, ghastly Tim Curry-esque mouth to solve a puzzle, picking up and hurling demons into its snapping hole while carefully evading falling in himself. Staying consistent

This carnival section is really fun, but it's not just thrown in for looks. It specifically enhances the kind of brutal, surreal violence that Rick is capable of.



Namco likens Rick to a bar-room brawler, a physically explosive fighter wielding brute force to dispose of his enemies.



with the horror theme, the puzzle is solved only when the mouth is so overly satiated that it cannot swallow any more. Its ghastly lips finally lie open and its tongue falls limp and protruding, and Rick must run inside to exit the level.

Bar-Room Fighting

In its evolution from 2D side-scrolling beat-'em-up to 3D beat-'em-up, Namco is building a seamless set of fighting systems underneath the hood. Rick isn't a Tekken fighter, nor is he a wrestler—though it's easy to make that comparison. Instead, Namco likens him to a bar-room brawler, a physically explosive fighter wielding brute force to dispose of his enemies.

Rick's basic move set is easy to learn. In what Namco envisions will be a 10-plus hour game, players will encounter a vast legion of

demons, many of which have come from the original arcade games. His basic attacks are employed through the two-tier "Splatter Kill System," using X, Y, B, A buttons on Xbox 360 (square, triangle, circle and X on PS3). The first-tier uses button taps gamers are used to, like rapidly hitting X, X, X.

Using a shoulder button as a modifier, Rick moves into the second tier of the Splatter Kill System, employing the analog sticks. When enemies have taken enough of a beating and are on the verge of death, they stand motionless and pulse with a red glow. At this point Rick can throw one last punch and finish them or explore Splatterhouse's deep brutality. Using the Analog Stick Kill System, Rick pulls off at least four moves. By moving the analog sticks up and down and then by pressing in, Rick can tear the enemy's jaw off his face. By moving the sticks together and apart, he can rip enemies in two. By pressing and holding the sticks, he can crush their necks. And by rotating the sticks, Rick can twist off their heads.

Like all valuable things, Analog Stick Kills must be earned. Each time Rick disposes of an enemy, it leaves an ethereal green mist behind called "Necro." The Mask automatically sucks



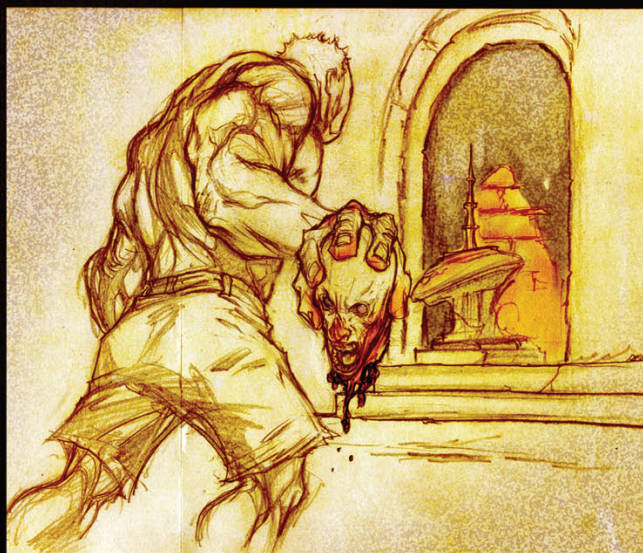
AIMING FOR AUTHENTICITY

Diehard fans who played the original coin-on Splatterhouse vividly remember the game's violent combat, its distinct synth '80s music, and its characters. Again and again during our session, Namco's Santa Clara team repeated the importance of staying true to the original arcade game.

"Survival horror games like Resident Evil are all about the suspense of the moment; they're not focused on the much more Western fixation of the viscera," says associate producer Daniel Tovar. "You know, that effect where there is a car crash and you want to see how that person got killed? It gives you that rush. That's what we are aiming for and where the original Splatterhouse was going—a game in the Final Fight style but in the vein of horror." Adds Cook, "It starts and ends with staying true to the original."

Bosses from the original game—BiggyMan and Mirror Rick—make their return, as do weapons such as 2x4s and machetes. The original game's Dr. West, who is referenced from the movie Re-Animator, based on H.P. Lovecraft's work, plays a big part in this remake.

Authenticity also means bringing back side-scrolling gameplay. Gamers will reach certain areas where Rick will seamlessly transition from free-roaming 3D environments into a fixed camera, 2D side-scrolling section. Is Namco also looking into packing in the original games? "There are Easter Eggs and other surprises all over Splatterhouse," says Brown, with a smile. "We pay homage to the original in a lot of ways."



THE MUSIC: MORE THAN METAL

The original games were renowned for their creepy, ethereal, and off-key soundtracks; the new *Splatterhouse* aims to deliver equally appropriate music from heavy metal to '80s movie score music. "We have bands like High on Fire, Mastodon, In Flames, Lamb of God, Gwar, and Cannibal Corpse, and we're tying to be clever about how heavy metal and horror fans' tastes mesh together for this game," said Daniel Tovar.

Splatterhouse will layer increasingly loud tempos during crucial parts of the game. It will go "'80s retro" for the side-scrolling section and, according to Cook, delivers an ample doze of ambiance too. "We're not here to play heavy metal music from start to finish. We're very carefully integrating it together. We use heavy metal music at the right times, especially high peak moments. And there are moments where we don't play music. It's the right thing to do."

Necro into it, and as indicated with a small iconic mask in the upper left-hand corner, it fills up like a gas tank. Rick must reach about a half mask, to enact Analog Stick Kills.

Rick also packs a trio of Necro-enhanced moves built to extend variety. The first is the Shock Wave, a linear attack that sends a green energy blast out to damage an enemy. The second attack does area effect damage, sending a circle blast to ward off huge waves of enemies. The third is the Berserker attack, which wipes out every drop of Necro but fries every enemy on screen.

Similar to the original coin-op, Rick fights predominantly with his bare hands. Each level also provides objects he can wield, including 2x4s, machetes, chainsaws, shotguns, and body parts such as legs and arms for ranged attacks. Weapons don't accumulate over the course of the game. Instead, once Rick leaves an area, he drops any weapon he is holding.

"We don't take ourselves too seriously," says Cook. "We focus on tongue-in-cheek, over-the-top brutality. It's very visceral. It's really about getting to the essence of being a homicidal maniac." [play](#)



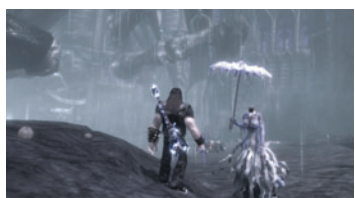


Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Modus Operandi: Play games in the genres I know and love to their conclusion and then rate them on how well, or not, they deliver relative to the system, genre, and target audience. Then I pet my Sgt. Frog.

Brain Drain: Magnacarta 2, Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2, Mini Ninjas...and Brutal Legend, in 1 issue! 150 hours of gameplay and edit spread over 10 days. What is this, Gamefan? ...And Muramasa just came out! When it rains... What the hell happened to Eric BTW?

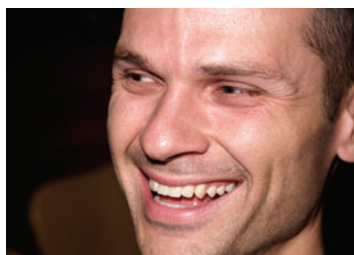
Game of the Month: Brutal Legend. In fact: time to Drop a Deuce and find Eddie a Bride...Isn't she sweet? Not much of a talker though. And her friends keep trying to kill me...I had my Asylum last issue...



Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end. **Brain Drain:** My two favorite games this summer were BlazBlue and Batman: Arkham Asylum. Which is strange, because I don't like fighting games, and I hate Batman. But weeks of people telling me of their greatness convinced me to take the plunge, and I'm glad I did. This is why more publishers should release their top-quality games in summer, with so few releases, every game has a chance to be the center of attention for a few weeks.

Game of the Month: Batman: Arkham Asylum



Brady Fiechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).

Brain Drain: This month has been painful as I watched Shadow Complex, Murumasa and Batman pass me by as I tried to discover how to add a few more hours to the day. Too many great games piling up and it's not even the holidays.

Game of the Month: Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box



Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe video games can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game. **Brain Drain:** I was at Fry's picking up a slim PS3, but came home with so much more: A product called "Gamer Grub", which claimed to be a "Gaming Performance Snack." It promised me improved "synaptic plasticity" thanks to "neurotransmitters... supporting cognitive performance" and came in four wildly differing flavors—Pizza, PB&J, Chocolate and Wasabi (!). I'm completely gobsmacked by the concept, but guess what? The stuff is actually pretty tasty.

Game of the Month: Batman: Arkham Asylum



Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me... **Brain Drain:** Another year of memorable, affordable DLC. Tripwire's Killing Floor, a crunchy co-op zombie slayer for less than 20 bones. Ten bucks purchases Hemisphere's absorbing and relaxing Osmos. The underplayed Caster, the ludicrous and essential Time Gentlemen, Please!—each available for the cost of a five dollar foot long. As Daft Punk once wrote, it's digital love.

Game of the Month: Aion



Heather Anne Campbell
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.

Brain Drain: Shadow Complex is so much fun! Talk about a game that gets it. I didn't get a chance to review the game proper, but I'm now playing it in my spare time. (Taking a break from gaming for work—and immediately playing another video game—shows you either how pathetic or passionate I am about this stuff). It floods me with a rush of hope for smaller titles—not that I wasn't already trumpeting the joys of PSN/Live/Ware originals. Man, Shadow Complex is FUN!

Game of the Month: Scribblenauts



Matt Cabral
EIC: Play Online

Modus Operandi: I can appreciate both score and score-less reviews, and believe they can absolutely coexist in our industry. I love to read—and often re-read—a well-written critique within the insightful pages of Play just as much as the next gamer. But sometimes, my Facebook-addicted, YouTube-surfing, iced coffee-swilling side craves the quick-hit satisfaction of a big fat number. Besides, have you ever tried reading a full review on an iPhone while driving? That's why playmagazine.com will host the same great review content from the magazine, with the addition of our classic 1-10 numbered scale. Plus, it gives us a voice on those sales-steering aggregate sites.

Brain Drain: Call me crazy, but I'm loving all these game delays. I'm still catching up on last year's towering stack of high profile holiday titles, so I'm happy to wait till 2010 for Bayonetta, BioShock 2 and Splinter Cell: Conviction. Plus, they'll hopefully benefit from a few extra months of polishing.

Game of the Month: Batman: Arkham Asylum



Eric L. Patterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.

Brain Drain: Persona 3 Portable (complete with new red-haired heroine) AND Pac-Man CE coming to the PSP; two games I hoped and prayed would hit the system but never expected to see. Maybe in celebration I'll finally upgrade from my old PSP-1000. Also, after finally trying Silent Hill: Homecoming, you know, it wasn't that bad. Ridiculously by-the-book, but still an enjoyable experience. **Game of the Month:** Persona PSP

Will the **BETRAYAL** of one,
mean the **END** for them all?

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BRÜTAL Legend

Now I know how "Den" felt

words Dave Halverson

Homage: hom-age - respect or reverence paid or rendered:

Parody: par-o-dy - any humorous, satirical, or burlesque imitation, as of a person, event, etc.

Ridicule: rid-i-cule - speech or action intended to cause contemptuous laughter at a person or thing; derision.

Since the first video game forged from the fiery furnace of heavy metal isn't closed captioned for the metal impaired, it's important to note that while Brutal Legend pays homage to the heyday of heavy metal, parodies hair metal, basks in the hollows of death metal, and ridicules the tortuous beats of nü metal, it does so with nary a disparaging word or lame pop-culture cliché... Bloody decapitations and face melting are so much more gratifying. The beauty of a game like Brutal Legend is that for better or worse, it spills forth directly from the designer's head and either lives or dies based on how well versed they are on subject at hand and how creative a mind they possess. A studio full of über talented game developers doesn't hurt either. Of the many universes swirling around in Tim Shafer's head, anyone who's rattled around in there will tell you that no matter what the premise, he shall make it his bitch. Like all the best story tellers—Tim Burton naturally comes to mind—wherever he landed in the entertainment macrocosm he was destined to succeed. Lucky for us (very lucky) he's become one of very few game designers able to conceive and develop games at the highest level, free from any outside influence.

I don't like point-and-click adventures. I don't hate them; I just don't see the point. And as far as I'm concerned playing a game on a PC is like hooking your PS3 player up to an old Zenith; yet, I was compelled to buy a "gaming rig" for the sole purpose of ogling the character designs in Grim Fandango, a game about a (dead) travel agent named Manny. That's how much I

appreciate Tim's particular style. It wasn't like the master of all things pointy and clicky was about to do a complete 180 and start making platformers...I still check my game closet regularly to make sure I didn't dream playing Psychonauts, but a game based on heavy metal, the very foundation on which my youth was chiseled? That's life affirming after 20 years reviewing video games.

Nearly four years later, having basked in the Metalness of Double Fine's conference room completely awestruck for our gameplay reveal (although that still doesn't excuse dying in the first Stage Battle), finally playing the game at home was the real reveal. At no time has Double Fine or EA, that I know of, touted Brutal Legend as an "open-world" game. It never dawned on me as I played through the first chapter that day that Double Fine was creating the game I've been harping about since GTA went 3D. "What I wouldn't give for a GTA set in a fantasy universe," I asserted so many years ago and many times since, but the way Brutal Legend gets underway, I had it pegged as an open-world/linear adventure hybrid. That said, while it does follow the conventions of the open-world genre, it's definitely not your average open-world game. In fact it's not your "average" anything. What it is, is the greatest video game ever created...if you've ever been to a Licorice Pizza or had an album collection containing Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Judas Priest or any other larger-than-life band before the music industry bit the dog-doo snow cone. There are still great bands out there (including a few of the old guard like Scorpions, Metallica, and Rush), but the age of metal gods like Judas Priest and Black Sabbath has passed; a fact super-roadie Eddie Riggs is painfully aware of as Brutal Legend gets underway via the best opening



cinema, following the best opening sequence, ever. For all I know it could be all over the web (beyond work or purchasing fine Japanese goods I'm web intolerant), but hopefully not. Regardless: the important thing is where it takes you—to the temple of Ormagöden, the Fire God where the Legend begins.

Once you've escaped the temple with the Separator (Eddie's axe) and Clementine (Eddie's other axe) into the free-roaming Metalscape,

What it is, is the greatest video game ever created...



Brütal Legend begins to take shape once you complete the first few missions; essentially building your army, leading up to your first Stage Battle. After freeing the Headbangers, Razor Girls, and your healers the Thunderhogs, it's time to meet the bane of the Human Resistance, General Lionwhyte (Judas Priest's Rob Halford) and get the show on the road. Stage Battles are both tactical and action oriented, incorporating simple D-pad commands for recruiting along with soloing and melee combat; and are a major part of the Brutal Legend dynamic, driving both the story and progression through the world. In your initial clash with Lionwhyte you need only fight off his Hair Metal forces, summon fans, recruit a few troops, and guard your "Merch Towers." Future battles however involve increasingly more squads and in turn more tactics. Stage Battles can be either a chore or more fun than that time you infiltrated the local disco with a flask of your Hodaka's two-stroke oil, depending on how well-versed you become in the art of Stage Battle tactics. You begin by playing the Fan Tribute Solo around Fan Geysers to erect Merch Booths, thus summoning fans to your stage, which allows Eddie to send more Squads into battle to attack and convert enemy geysers, and defend their own until the enemy is crippled enough to storm their stage and pound it to oblivion. The more fans you accumulate, the higher level Stage Upgrades you can unlock relative to the battle—Legions of Headbangers, Razor Girls, Roadies, Headsplitters, Metal Beasts, Thunderhogs, Fire Barons and the king of all units, the Rock Crusher, a massive assault vehicle armed with pyro mortars that rain death from the sky, portable speaker stacks to motivate nearby troops, and a front spinning crusher that will churn all comers into a creamy mulch. All infantry and vehicles also have a Double Team attack with Eddie; Headbangers form a Mosh Pit; riding with a Fire Baron, Eddie

Like all of Tim Schafer's games, the heart and soul of Brutal Legend is its story.

No laws, no traffic,
no speed limit, and
100+ Metal tracks.
Go into the light.



lays down a trail of flaming booze (oh yeah); and on the Rock Crusher he can summon the Blade of the Metal Gods themselves. Bear in mind however that for every unit Eddie has, Lionwhyte, Doviculus, and your other nemesis have the glam or Coil equivalent, and guess who they all want to kill...

Enter Double Fine's debut on the open-world stage. Eddie affects the world around him with his guitar Clementine by discovering and jamming in front of various landmarks. By playing the Relic Raiser Solo in front of Tab Slabs—ancient artifacts left behind by the Metal Gods to document riffs and power chords—Eddie learns more Solos to use throughout the world and issue more and more commands in battle. First stop, the Motor Forge; play the Relic Raiser in front of one of the many giant supercharged Hemi's emanating from the earth and say hello to your garage door to the subterranean underground, where the Guardian of Metal (our own Metal God, Ozzie) awaits, to trade any Fire Tributes Eddie's earned to upgrade the Separator or Clementine; learn new moves; or fortify the Deuce with armor, performance, weapon, or cosmetic upgrades. Motor Forges are located throughout the world, as are ways to earn the many Fire Tributes to

spend within, making Eddie stronger and The Deuce faster and meaner. Fire Tribute is awarded for completing core and secondary missions or by interacting with the vast wilderness around you; raising Buried Metal—which also adds new songs to your burgeoning Metal playlist “The Mouth of Metal,” launching the Deuce off Lightning Plug Jumps, finding and using Landmark Viewers, and freeing the 120 Bound Serpent statues that Doviculus has chained and ball-gagged. For every ten you free, the Metal Gods grant Eddie a sliver of Ormagöden’s undying power, a.k.a. health and power upgrades—Metal style. Meanwhile, secondary missions are plentiful and come in many varieties contingent on whether you’re in a hurry gearing up for a big mission or Stage Battle (you can always say “Later”) or looking to spend some quality time in the vastness of the world. If you’re in need of some quick Fire Tribute, set the light of the Metal Gods (your waypoint) for the nearest Ironheade Sneak Attack and help your Headbangers keep the peace, or take a spin on the Death Rack where The Deuce becomes your own personal turret. If you’ve got some time on your hands though, the Race the Battered Plains missions pit Eddie against Fletus, a bug-eyed demon (Brian Johnson? Yeah...) that drives a “Big Daddy” Roth-style Funny Car called the Squealer in an ongoing racing rivalry (do it for the sauce) that never gets old; in Summon Fiery Death Eddie marks the spot for The Cannoniers’

Eddie’s obviously scoping out the chooper for the DLC... Needs more chrome.

Jack Black was born to play Eddie Riggs.

missiles (and say hello to the other half of “The D”), and in Overslaughter, another ongoing rivalry (only this one’s bitter, take a swing at him for a chortle), Eddie must beat the Hunter’s kill record at slaying various native beasts. Once you’ve acquired the Call of the Wild Solo, the last species you overslaughtered will show up whenever it’s played to assist in battle or just ride (or lumber) around. Of particular interest are the random missions such as Speedy Delivery (deliver the beer, shaken, not flat) and a very special little aside involving a family of bats... A preview of future DLC to come?

Of course, like all of Tim Schafer’s games, the heart and soul of *Brütal Legend* is its story. You might not expect much from a story about an old-school metal roadie stuck in a nū metal world summoned to a parallel universe where his skills turn the tide in humanity’s last stand against its demonic oppressors (unless of course you know the Milkman) but true to form, it’s loaded with twists and turns, superbly written and bursting with invention. I expected no less from Tim Schafer (I know the

Milkman well), but Jack Black really put it over the top. Give a great actor like Jack Black a character he (clearly) loves, a script he can get behind and the ultimate nemesis on which to cast his aspersions—Tim Curry as Doviculus; Frankenfurter?! It’s genius!—a gaggle of metal icons who obviously felt right at home (Rob Halford, Lemmy, and Ozzie in a video game!) and a supporting cast that seems to play off of the collective energy, and suddenly it’s a whole new video game.

In much the same way *Psychonauts*, as original as it was, was built on a time-honored platforming foundation, *Brütal Legend* to settles into a familiar open-world construct once the stage is set, as you move your increasingly budding army from Stage Battle to Stage Battle just as you would your thug from safe house to safe house, interspersed with secondary missions and of course, the freedom to roam free anytime, anywhere and soak it all in. And that’s the biggest difference between *Brütal Legend* and every other open-world game right there. Exploration is 3D gaming’s greatest





attribute, if not its saving grace. Who can resist combing every inch of a bustling virtual world? But is aping urban sprawls really the best we can do? Not any more. *Brütal Legend* offers exploration and discovery to your heart's content in a universe you'll never want to leave (and you don't have to) amid an original story you'll wish would never end.

Like all good things, it does, with a vengeance, but life goes on... Hop in The Deuce, which becomes like a second character of your own design, and you can plow the open roads and everywhere else, or spend hours on end finding Dragon Statues, Landmark Viewers, and Raising Metal to complete the playlist (much of the best is towards the end) or hitting all those jumps you missed. Summon a creature (I've developed an unnatural bond with the Metal Beast and Zualia) and join the endless parade of caravans in pockets of battle, or better yet, set out on foot and see what five years of Double-Fine labor looks like up close (as the wildlife gets personal) as the giant architecture of the Titans towers around you; a constant reminder of how colossal they were before they etched their teachings into the earth and ascended to the heavens. Speaking of which, the skies over *Brütal Legend* are in a constant state of flux as day turns to night in each individual region. From the swirling cloud bursts above Bladehenge to the purple and blue/green skies and skull moons beyond Lionwhyte's fortress, it's like an ever-changing light show in the sky...clearly the work of a man of many black lights, plasma, lasers, strobes and other such trance inducing fixtures that graced the bedrooms of the late '70s and '80s.

Racing across the rugged terrain, fire bursting from the Deuce's headers, blasting vintage Scorpions as warring cells and indigenous beasts scurry across the landscape, I developed an emotional connection to *Brütal Legend* that never let up, although I honestly can't begin to imagine the effect it will have on someone who just downloaded, say, *NOW That's What I Call Music!* 31. Perhaps it will awaken some primal metal gene deep inside, or maybe they'll just burst into flame. It's more likely that the character and overall game and world design will win them over, and you can toggle any of the 106 tracks on or off (many of which are perfectly civilized) or (outside of the core missions) go with the game's spine-tingling ambient score. No metal mandate here, although I highly recommend it. For the metal fan however, Double Fine owns it from beginning to end. Everything you know and love to do with metal courses through every fiber of its being, and any devil-worshipping child of the '70s or '80s will tell you, it's as authentic an homage any of us could ever hope for. See you at Black Mass. [play](#)

parting shot

There's never been anything like it and there may never be again. *Brütal Legend* is truly a gift to metal and game fans alike and my new, best 3D game ever.

Cursed Mountain

Cloudy with a chance of specters

words Matt Cabral



The Wii sees so few Mature-rated titles, let alone adult-aimed exclusives, that I take special notice when a promising original IP like Cursed Mountain lands on the party game-loving platform. But for me, Deep Silver's trek to the possessed Tibetan peaks carries even more appeal than the "M" on the front of the box. It's also a survival horror game (one of my absolute favorite genres), set in snow-covered environments. From Lost Planet's arctic action to the frigid fun teased in the upcoming Uncharted 2, I'm a total sucker for cold weather settings in my games, so an entire title unfolding on the bone-chilling slopes of a haunted mountain, more than has my attention.

Thankfully, Cursed Mountain nails the better-pack-a-sweater vibe with great ice, wind, snow, and fog effects—I played the game on a hot August weekend, and was still tempted to fix myself a steaming cup of cocoa. It's not just the

Cursed Mountain nails the better-pack-a-sweater vibe.

biting cold atmosphere that'll chill your bones, though, as the game's engaging tale will also send shivers down your spine. Playing as a seasoned mountaineer searching for your lost brother, you'll battle spooks and spirits as much as the elements during your increasingly grueling hike to the heavens-reaching Himalayan peaks. Steeped in Tibetan Buddhist beliefs, Cursed Mountain tasks you with thwarting a variety of pissed-off poltergeists trapped in the Bardo—a sort of suspended state between life and death.



While the refreshing story (no zombies and shotguns for a change) and immersion-ratcheting setting work well, a few flaws occasionally yank you from the otherwise engaging experience. Most notable are the sometimes unresponsive Wii controls; while taking your pick-axe to a not-of-this-realm threat works spot-on, some of the more advanced spell-like abilities, requiring more complex gesturing, don't always register accurately. Additionally, the game suffers from some slow pacing. Even in a genre known for strapping the player with tedious exploration and fetch quests, Cursed Mountain will have you craving more action.

Even with its faults, I commend Deep Silver's efforts to try something different both on the Wii and within the survival horror genre. The story and setting alone make this one far more satisfying than Silent Hill's last console outing. I'd love to see what could be done with this IP on the 360 or PS3, but in the meantime, fans of snow and spooks could do a lot worse than this haunted Himalayan adventure. [play](#)

parting shot

Fantastic atmosphere, setting and story will chill your bones and nerves. But spotty controls and some tedious pacing keep Cursed Mountain from reaching its full potential.

You'll battle the cold, and spectres like this one.





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NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA 2

United they stand

words Dave Halverson

To call Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2 anything less than the king of pure unadulterated guilty pleasure action would be to feign the truth because it is...no more, and no less. They say that good things come to those who wait...I guess they were right. Because right now a 120-gb PS3 will only set you back \$299 and you can take it home with Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2, the Xbox 360 exclusive, that's no longer exclusive. What's exclusive is three extra levels featuring three newly playable characters, visual and gameplay refinements and some new toys to make that whole "hard" thing go away...

But let's talk about playing with girls. I'm forever grateful to Team Ninja for including Momiji, Rachel, and Ayane in Sigma 2, although I have to say I was hoping their levels would be equal to a typical Ryu stage. The girls themselves are of course amazing; Momiji's aerial Ultimate is awesome (she's awesome), Ayane moves like lightning—she gets my vote for the new star of Ninja Gaiden, Ryu needs a rest—and nobody handles a two-handed Inferno Hammer like Rachel. I was just hoping

they'd get to spread their wings a little beyond linear set pieces (roughly 1/3rd of a Ryu stage) based on existing architecture with minor branching, peppered with encounters and a boss. Although considering this is technically bonus material and the fact that they make Team Battle all it can be, I'm gonna shut up now...

Where Sigma 2 really shines, even for (another) Sigma, is in the Team Missions. All previous arena fighters pale in its wake. Played either on or offline, imagine the intensity of a large scale NG Demon or Fiend battle, times two, only in much larger areas. After selecting any Ninpo, weapons, or extras carried over from the game (there is much to unlock, although you can't access the menu from the field so choose wisely), it's all about teamwork (hence the name I suppose). There's no healing, so the only way to stay alive is to stay close. You can revive a near-death team mate with circle, and if things get really hairy (which they will) Ultimate Ninpo is double the fun. When the entrails clear, cue up Ninja Cinema and check out your bad self. There's no playback functionality (must be shot on handheld) but if you're so inclined you can upload your big brawl for the world to see, or at least the portion of it that's hanging around



...the deepest of all this era's iterations, and the most playable.

waiting to see your Ninja Cinema. I'm getting together a synchronized ninja squad as we speak.

A quick note on the game; try not to wet yourself when GIANT statues attack—Lady Liberty is pissed—and for anyone out there who thinks these Itagaki-era Ninja Gaidens (they should keep cycling lead designers like Menudo) are too hard, all you need is Enma's Fang (Ryu's new Sword of the Berserk/Cloud Strife size mega-sword) and the Howling Cannon. The Ultimate Technique with Enma's Fang is like a cheat code. You'll have so much Essence by game's end you can buy your own Muramasa shop.

Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2 is many things: it's the deepest of all this era's iterations, and the most playable; it's certainly a gift to PS3 enthusiasts, especially at the new price point, and there's something about playing Ayane, Momiji, and Rachel that makes it seem like a fond farewell. Team Ninja has truly taken it as far as they can. I can't wait to see where they take it from here. Perhaps back to its action-platforming roots with Momiji as the lead, or, like so many have pondered, into the open-world. [play](#)

parting shot

What can I say? It's as polished as ever; all three Gaiden girls are a site to behold (wish they had levels to match), the new weapons help even the score, and the Team Missions are a blast. If you don't own a Ninja Gaiden, Sigma 2 is a no brainer and if you do... Well, can you resist?

NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA 2 Interview

Interview with Yosuke Hayashi, Producer, Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2

Interview Dai Kohama and Nick Des Barres
Transcribed by Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres



play: Thanks so much for your time today.

Tecmo (ed. note—or, at least, ex-Team Ninja head Tomonobu Itagaki) has stated in the past that Ninja Gaiden II would not be coming to the PlayStation 3. Why now?

Yosuke Hayashi: The philosophy behind the Ninja Gaiden series has always been to create the very best action game for every platform it is released on. On PS3, I wanted to take a step back, and produce a game that could be positioned as a culmination of the entire series. So, although there are elements from Ninja Gaiden II, this isn't a port. We also took elements from the first Sigma and Dragon Sword on DS, brought them all together, and reconstructed them—that's Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2. The key features are three new playable characters, in addition to our hero Ryu Hayabusa. We have Ayane, the female ninja from Dead Or Alive, playable in the series for the first time; Rachel, playable in Sigma 1 but significantly overhauled for 2; and finally Momiji, the heroine of Dragon Sword, also playable for the first time. With four different playable characters, we thought it might be interesting to take a game that's always been strictly solo into the multiplayer arena with a co-op mode. You'll be able to choose one of the four characters, along with your favorite weapon, and play what we call "Team Missions" with friends online. We've wanted to experiment

with what might be possible in online multiplayer with this type of action game for a while, so that was another big reason for making Sigma 2.

Was making the female characters playable for the duration of the main quest ever considered? Or would it require too much reworking?

I really believe that games bearing the Ninja Gaiden name are Ryu Hayabusa's stories. I think that the female characters serve to make the Ninja Gaiden world viewable from various different angles—to make it more three-dimensional, so to speak. So, no, we never considered making them playable from beginning to end in the main story.

Because Ninja Gaiden belongs to Ryu.

Exactly. When other action games introduce new characters, they often place them right alongside the original heroes...but we feel that this series can only exist with Ryu at the center. In that sense, I consider Ayane, Rachel and Momiji to be guests. However, I did want to give players the chance to play them whenever they wanted, which is another reason for the Team Missions.

Are you considering expanding the online Team Missions through DLC, perhaps like the famous Hurricane Packs of the past? They're fantastic, but some of our editors

“On PS3, I wanted to take a step back, and produce a game that could be positioned as a culmination of the entire series.”





were left wishing there were more.

I think one of the great strengths of being online is that we can form a dialogue with the users. Before we decide how to move forward with the online modes, I want to let the fans play the existing ones and get their feedback. Of course, we won't neglect the offline modes, either... By the way, when I hear people say the Team Missions are short, I try to think positively, like: "They must have had fun if they want more!" (laughs). Anyway, the direction we take our online gaming in the future will depend on user feedback. We do have an online vision for our future, but it might... whether it becomes an expansion for Sigma 2 or an entirely new game, I can't say yet.

While we're on the topic for DLC, are you planning any other Hurricane Pack-like features for Sigma 2? New stages, new costumes...?

The concept of this game is really... I want people to play as much as they can off the disc. I do not want fans kind enough to buy our game to be unable to play all of it, so we're not really planning any additional content right now. We're still considering some things, but I don't feel very positive about "unlock"-style DLC.

It's interesting to hear different developers'

stances on DLC. A lot of Western companies deem it essential, but a lot of Japanese developers I talk to seem to dislike it.

Personally, I think games should be worth the money people pay to buy them. This may be an outdated way of thinking, but... I want people to enjoy the base game fully first. I don't like the idea of forcing users to buy a disc that already has locked DLC on it. However, I think it can be appropriate to create all-new, additional content for people who genuinely love the game and want more to play. Basically, I'm against games that are planning DLC even before release.

How does Sigma 2's difficulty compare to NGII's? Many fans thought that game had a bizarre difficulty slope and was unduly hard, even for a Ninja Gaiden game. Has Sigma 2 received balancing tweaks?

I'm afraid I can't comment about Ninja Gaiden II, since I wasn't involved in making it. I can't say why that type of balance was approved for that game. On Sigma 2, however... you know the standee I just showed you in the Tecmo lobby, the one with the slogan "Akushon geemu wo ai suru subete no

hito he" ("For everyone who loves action games")? Personally, I want everyone who likes action games to give it a try. With that philosophy in mind, we created the difficulty balance for Sigma 2 from the ground up—it's completely redone. Action games are fun precisely because they're challenging, so it's not simply a matter of "easy" or "hard," but... I think the game will be enjoyable even for those who enjoy action games, but maybe aren't so great at them.

How difficult is it adapting AI routines and balancing enemies designed to fight against Ryu for three other characters? Is it any harder than, say, giving Ryu a new weapon?

New characters are much harder. Our entire staff has a consensus about what Ryu can and can't do, what he moves like, what his abilities are. For the new characters, nobody has a concrete feeling for them yet, so we have to go through the process of getting them moving and putting them in the game before we can say "This feels right" or "No, that's not very Ayane." Creating new characters is enjoyable for us, but very difficult.

Which would you say was the most difficult?



"...the direction we take our online gaming in the future will depend on user feedback."

Definite Momiji. The only game she had ever been in before was Dragon Sword on DS, so she had been made fairly simply. Honestly, there were no clear answers to questions like what she would look like as high-res model, what sort of weapon she would use, and what her abilities were. All our staff had different ideas about her, but I think it came together well in the end, and we were able to bring her personality to life in 3D.

There seems to be a huge amount of new content in Sigma 2. How long do you expect it to take for a player to finish?

I expect the story mode alone to take a good 15 hours on the first play... maybe 20 for people who like to move slower. After that, they can play the Team Missions, try harder difficulties, or score attacks for individual chapters... it's really packed (laughs). I think the reason we were able to produce so much new content is... well, a lot of stuff happened with Team Ninja last year. I don't want to say our fans began to doubt us, but... they may have been getting nervous, and I recognize that. We wanted to prove to everyone we're still very positive about making games, and that we make great ones. Everyone at Team Ninja shares the same feeling, so that's probably why Sigma 2 has so much content (laughs). Speaking from a pure asset perspective, like the number of new enemies and so on, it's probably 30-40% new. But beyond that, we've rebuilt the game virtually from scratch, right down to the level design and enemy AI routines.

I'm curious about the toned-down violence. Ninja Gaiden II was a splatterfest, and Tomonobu Itagaki had even said "the violence is integral to the gameplay, there's no way it could be cut."

About Ninja Gaiden II... again, this is just my concept of the game, but I think it put violence front and center. Since Sigma 2 is positioned as the ultimate culmination of the series, I wanted to try an all-new concept. If Ninja Gaiden II's concept was "Violent," Sigma 2's is "Cool." That's why some of the effects are different. With that said, the base of Ninja Gaiden II's system hasn't changed... it's evolved. Violence does not equal a game system. Fans of Ninja Gaiden II will notice right away that the essence

"Not a single gameplay feature from Ninja Gaiden II has been cut in Sigma 2."

of the series has actually been expanded on.

So no gameplay alterations had to be made to compensate for the lack of gore?

Not a single gameplay feature from Ninja Gaiden II has been cut in Sigma 2. There might not be as much blood, but the gameplay is absolutely there.

The gore may be gone, but I was really impressed with the other graphical improvements. Things like the day to night transitions—were they planned for the original Ninja Gaiden II, but cut?

There were no plans for a Sigma 2 until after Ninja Gaiden II, so nothing in the game was planned for the original. The day to night changes, and all the other improvements, were made when we analyzed each stage and re-thought them. How could the maps be made to look more beautiful? How could we make the characters look even cooler? That's what the graphical additions are about.

What's your favorite new addition?

This is a very long game—Ninja Gaiden II plus all the variations, 17 chapters total—but I want fans to make it through to the ending. The ending to Ninja Gaiden II made quite an impression, I think, but in Sigma 2 we did things a little differently. I'd say the ending is my favorite.

Incidentally, is the giant stone statue in the first stage a sort of statement—"this isn't your father's Ninja Gaiden II"?

Yes, actually (laughs). We added it in there, "barn!", to show that Sigma 2 isn't simply an enhanced re-release or port of II. We knew we wanted something very Japanese for the Cyber Tokyo stage, so we came up with the giant Buddha idea. **While we're on the subject of graphics, I have**





to ask about the resolution. *Ninja Gaiden II* was infamous for rendering below 720p, at 1120x585. What's the resolution in *Sigma 2*? In this game our internal rendering resolution is actually higher than 720p.

How would you describe development on PS3? Being familiar with both next-gen platforms, is there anything you can do on PS3 that

... I don't think is possible on 360, or vice-versa?

With regards to the PS3, Sony has been working hard, and the PS3 development environment has really come together. There's nothing inconvenient or difficult about working on PS3 any more. That's not to say Microsoft's support isn't great, but I get the impression that Sony is working extra hard for third parties lately. As far as comparing them... it really depends on what type of graphics or effects we're going for in a particular game, so there are no simple comparisons that can be made. I think both platforms are very interesting hardware.

I'm curious, do you have a personal preference for either? The previous director of Team Ninja's preference was very clear (laughs).

We actually just finished the gold master for *Sigma 2* yesterday, and I was asking our lead programmer, "So how was it, developing on PS3?" He told me "In development terms, it wasn't any harder than doing a 360 game," but personally... I don't mean to give you a noncommittal answer, but I own every game system, and I really do enjoy playing them all (laughs). **A Japanese game producer who actually plays games, that's refreshing! May I ask what you've**



"There's nothing inconvenient or difficult about working on PS3 any more."

been playing lately?

Um... is *Friend Collection* (ed. note—a DS social networking game) coming out in America? (laughs)

I don't think so. (laughs)

It was produced by Yoshio Sakamoto at Nintendo, with whom we're making *Metroid: Other M* with right now. It's so fun, I play it every day!

A few days ago, the slim PS3 was announced. Are you excited about the platform's future? Any chance of a limited edition "Ayane Purple" console? (laughs)

I'll be very happy if the new slim announcement means more people will own a PS3! Speaking from a personal standpoint, there's nothing better than thinner and smaller, so I think it's absolutely fantastic. Now, a limited bundle... of course I'd be happy if new PS3 owners get interested in *Sigma 2*, but I'm hoping current PS3 owners will buy and enjoy it, so there are no plans right now (laughs).

Team Ninja seems to be going in new directions after the departure of Mr. Itagaki, who said *Ninja Gaiden II* would be the final game in the series. Does that statement still stand?

I don't mean to dodge the question, but... like I said, we consider *Sigma 2* to be the ultimate culmination of the series. It's not a decision for us to make—it depends on whether or not fans enjoy the game and want to play more. We consider this the culmination, but should our desires and those of the fans come together as two halves of one whole at some point in the future... let's just say I want to build the future of Team Ninja together with our fans.

Speaking of Mr. Itagaki, he was quite fond of mentioning two top-secret games in development at Team Ninja called "Project Progressive" and "Code Cronus." Are those projects still underway, following his departure?

Those two projects, well... they only existed inside Mr. Itagaki's head. A small amount of internal research had been done on them, which we're experimenting with right now for future projects. The names may have changed, but we're still working on some aspects of [Progressive and Cronus]. They may be released as actual products, or may never get past the experiment phase. I'm sorry I can't say more.

Do you see Team Ninja becoming a platform-agnostic developer now? Perhaps not so Xbox-centric?

It goes without saying there are a lot of *Ninja Gaiden* fans on Xbox, and we were able to make *Sigma 2* because a lot of people enjoyed *Sigma 1* on PS3. Considering that there are Team Ninja fans on both platforms, I want to adopt an approach that will make everyone happy going forward.

Speaking of multi-platform, can I get you to talk a little bit about *Metroid: Other*

M? How did that project come about?

Mr. Sakamoto from Nintendo, who I mentioned earlier, really wanted to do a third person, 3D *Metroid*. However, his team had only worked on handheld games in the past—they'd never done a 3D game. We quite simply received an offer from him, when he was searching for a team with 3D skills that might share his vision for *Metroid*. After meeting and discussing the idea with him, I knew this would be a fascinating challenge for Team Ninja—to put our skills to the test and display them in a *Metroid*. Even better, we have a lot of *Metroid* fans on staff, so it was a very easy decision to make. By the way, the "Project M" from the E3 trailer doesn't mean this is a game outsourced to Team Ninja and published by Nintendo. We're really making it hand-in-hand: Team Ninja isn't Project M, we're participating in Project M.

What has working with motion control been like? MotionPlus, Natal and the PlayStation Motion Controller seem to be the wave of the future. Are you brimming with ideas about how to use them?

We're thinking about a lot of things. If we determine that making a motion control game will be a positive challenge, we'll accept that challenge with open arms. Of course, there's the question of whether or not Team Ninja fans want that sort of game from us... I think a lot of people would tell us they'd rather use a controller. When and if we think it's appropriate, we'll do it, but you won't see any half-baked games with dual controller schemes from us. If we do something, it'll be completely based around motion control.

The original 2004 *Ninja Gaiden* set the third person action genre on fire. In late 2009/2010, we'll be seeing countless other entries in the genre, from *Bayonetta* to *God of War III*. As someone who participated in the modern rebirth of the genre, how do you feel about where it's going?

First, I feel that this genre is sorely lacking in online features. Nowadays online has become the norm for TPS and FPS, with the offline campaigns almost a bonus feature. On the other hand, third person action games are completely offline. Right now, I'm interested in how other developers will push third person action into the online era. That's why we tried online co-op in *Sigma 2*. Really, I'm incredibly curious about how other action game developers are going to take the genre online. I think there's a lot of friendly competition going on in third person action right now, and we want to continually keep ourselves at the top of the genre.

Finally, if you have a message for Team Ninja fans awaiting *Ninja Gaiden Sigma II*...

Like I mentioned before, I think even Team Ninja's most ardent fans had become slightly worried about us. This game is our response to those fears. I'm confident *Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2* will wipe away any doubts our fans may have, so please look forward to it. I think it'll be even better than you're expecting. [play](#)

System: Xbox 360/PS3/Wii/PC **Developer:** Codemasters **Publisher:** Codemasters **ESRB:** Teen **Available:** September 8

DiRT 2

The thrill of Rally

The era of the arcade racer many of us grew up with is over. E3 was a revelation: more than a few new series revved their engines therein, spiritual successors to arcade cabinet dinosaurs and subsequent biological re-imaginings of the genre tearing up the show floor's competitive track while vying to place highest for our attention.

DiRT 2, on the other hand, is a comparatively quiet and traditional ride. And as much as I might be intrigued by the unique approaches seen in Split Second and Blur, it'd be a disservice to just blow past a more grounded racer like DiRT—'cause goddamn, is this game good.

It just requires some skill, finesse, and yes, real practice. When every slide or cut through a sharp hairpin run can make or break you, the power and consequence of every curve and crest on a course should you fail to take it correctly quickly becomes apparent. It's just one more testament to

Codemasters' racing pedigree. DiRT practically lusters with polish, even when kicking up treaded mud.

The game is also a painstaking and loving tribute to Colin McCrae, giving you the whole rally package. The global DiRT tour has enough meat on its bones to keep you satiated for a long time, with events in everything from rallycross to the dune-buggy friendly land rush, as you ascend the ranks all the way to the X-Games (and beyond). Whether you like rally or not, don't miss this one. **Steve Haske**

parting shot

GT what? DiRT 2 is the real deal, capturing the thrill of rally racing in one hell of a slick package. Play it for the mud sliding physics alone.



System: Xbox 360/PC **Developer:** TimeGate Studios **Publisher:** SouthPeak Games **Rating:** T **Available:** September 1

Section 8

Stay alive with overdrive

In the distant future, colony wars are fought in far off galaxies by expanding human factions, with elite platoons of armored soldiers fighting for territory across contested planets. This is TimeGate's Section 8, which aims to conquer the market with a first-time IP that pushes few envelopes in the action FPS genre, yet delivers a sturdy multiplayer package that could hook a lasting player base on 360 and PC.

The point of entry for many will be S8's single-player campaign, the story of Alex Corde, a rising soldier in the Empire's 8th Armored Infantry (nicknamed Section 8 by the military, a code assigned to soldiers unfit for combat due to insanity). The 8th is dispatched to the most dangerous hotspots, currently a protracted battle for territory against the Arm of Orion. If you've digested the campaign of an Unreal Tournament game, this is the sort of experience you should expect in Section 8: an extended training session of modes and objectives to prepare you for the game's superior multiplayer component. To its credit, this campaign is loaded with cutscenes, decent VO, and TimeGate attempts to infuse Alex with a warrior's haunted conscience. For the most part, however, you'll be prodded along by grainy radio transmissions conveying multiplayer-style mission objectives like VIP escorts, intel delivery, bomb placement, hacking, and convoy protection.

Thus we find much of Section 8's value resting on the shoulders of its core action and objectives design, where this Unreal Engine 3-powered FPS shows you a pretty good time. Like an amalgamation of UT 3, Crysis Wars, and Enemy Territory, Section 8 leans towards hyper-fast squad shooter action. You'll deploy from a dropship 15,000 feet over the theatre of war in a real-time "burn in"—a thrilling, slightly controllable free-fall. In addition to regenerating shields, your power armor has an overdrive run boost, allowing you to burn in outside anti-aircraft radius, shift into overdrive, and

sprint like an untiring cheetah across huge expanses. A rechargeable jet-pack boost provides enough lift to leap tall buildings, rounding out S8's fast and dynamic cybernetic suit repertoire. To reel in the combat during this free movement, the firing action relies heavily on a recharging lock-on system, which you'll need to master and buff with abilities.

Section 8 includes a rather impressive backbone of customization, achievements and feats. There are loadouts like Assault, Engineer, Infiltrator, Recon, Guardian and Artillery, but these are offered as pre-set options, not strict selectable archetypes. Enter the loadout customizer to swap equipment and assign points to a range of passive power modules, improving shielding, repair speed, lock-on duration and recharge, shot power, and raising one's stealth matrix, which makes it tougher for sensors and turrets to get a lock on you. Conveniently, you see your squad's current load-out in the HUD, so you can enter the fray with gear and passive modules that compliment the team's current objectives.

By completing the aforementioned dynamic missions (escort, delivery, hacking, demolition, etc.), your squad will earn Victory Points and cash towards field upgrades. Said missions become available as individuals on the team accumulate personal Feats (stuff like killing X amount of players with a sniper gun in one life) that contribute to a collective team score. Rounds move along at a breakneck pace from goal to goal, whether you're chumming around with the competent AI bots in the campaign, or in the thick of a 32-player battle online. It's in this maelstrom of micro-missions, achievements, feats, and soldier possibilities that Section 8 finds its form: as a multiplayer experience enriched by comprehensive stats, rank ascension, leaderboards and community. **Mike Griffin**



parting shot

Slick sci-fi palettes, strong sound design and stable performance pull you into Section 8. Sub-orbital drops, zippy character movement and effortless mission tracking make navigation dynamic and fun. A scarcely adequate campaign means life for S8 proceeds online, where teamwork is rewarding, the loadout system is fairly nuanced, and both 360 and PC enjoy detailed multiplayer portals.

mini Ninjas

Mini things come in great BIG packages

words Dave Halverson

Welcome to Mini Ninjas, the cutest looking action-adventure you don't know squat about that's among the top five best games I've played this year. It may look like kid-stuff at a glance, which it is—Mini Ninjas is the first E-10+ action game to score big with our 8-10 review crew since Banjo on 360—and a whole lot more. It also appears to be a somewhat simplistic game, visually forgoing next-gen sheen for a more cartoon veneer, which it is, and a whole lot more. What it doesn't appear to be is the best thing to happen to adventure gaming, regardless of age, since short shorts, which it also is, and a whole lot more. So what is it? Well, let's just say that there are linear worlds, open worlds and the Mini Ninja world, which combines the tight gameplay and fun of linearity with the

exploration and first and secondary mission structure of an open world, only without the annoying prompts.

...Unbeknownst to the Ninja Master, an evil warlord long banished has reawakened after 300 years and begun using ancient Kuji magic to transform innocent animals into mindless wicked (mini) Samurai. Sensing something amiss

in the world, one by one the Ninja Master sent his best ninja to investigate and one by one they never returned, until only two remained: Hiro and Futo. The first ninja in 300 years with the power to control Kuji magic, Hiro is very special among the Mountain Ninja tribe, but he is also the youngest and has only begun to learn the Kuji way. His best friend Futo is also unique (as in not



IO gives us a reason to comb every inch of each gorgeous setting.

Hiro lays the smackdown, Kuji-style



exactly “Mini”) and nearly ended up working in the kitchen, until they finally found him a weapon as big as his appetite. And so together they leave Ninja Mountain to find out what’s upsetting the balance of nature and hopefully their four missing ninja brothers and sisters along the way.

The idea behind Mini Ninjas is obviously “Mini” ninjas—massive world, but they never said anything about attitude. If ever a gaggle of cherub shaped video game characters have managed to be both dangerous and “I want one...now” cute, these are them. They’re also lightning fast,

stealthy, and funny, which is in direct contrast to their surroundings. The Mini Ninjas construct is simply immense in scale and exudes the kind of palpable ambience you’d expect from a game like Tomb Raider, only derived from the Japanese countryside, and mixed with the battle cries of hyper-active miniature evil samurai. Sounds totally wack I know, but in practical use it’s gamer Crazy Glue. IO gives us a reason to comb every inch of their vast wilderness...or not. You don’t have to explore; how you progress however is contingent on how you play. There’s always a path, bridge, or some sort of main road to follow, but where there are pathways, there are faceless animate armor freaks with burning yellow eyes that go completely mental when at the site (or sound) of you. Whoever came up with the bat-shit mini-samurai battle cry by the way, IO should give a day in their honor. Eventually you’ll want to be seen (fighting is fun!) but exploring your surroundings first is most wise. By finding and making offering at the Kuji Shrines hidden throughout the world, Hiro learns powerful Kuji magic. Using the “Detect Kuji Shrine” spell, for instance, unleashes twinkling sprites that will lead you to them, if one is nearby, or you can pretend you’re that crazy mo-fo they drop into no-man’s land so we can watch him eat bark. By studying subtle variations in the foliage, you can usually spot hidden canyons and coves. The second Kuji Scroll Hiro discovers, called “Spirit Form,” allows him to possess any nearby critter, and since vanquished Samurai return to their original (critter) form, they’re usually underfoot. So you can pop into a fox or rabbit and attempt to scamper by samurai patrols, or crouch in the tall grass and try to sneak by...or just run at them and wait for the “Mini-mini-mini-neeeeja!” Besides scurrying little samurai, the warlord has archers, wizards, giants, and GIANTS. For witless little ghouls the little guys can be pretty tricky, but the larger they are, well you know, the harder they pound on you, so it’s always good to have a fire jitsu ready and/or plenty of potions on hand.

Your inventory of items, valuables, recipes, and ingredients are also foraged from nature. The only things you can buy in Mini Ninjas are recipes. All of the items Hiro and his friends use for healing and blowing things up are either found or made from ingredients that you pick up in each level, hence the need to explore. A mixture of Blue Petal flowers and Oyster Mushrooms makes a soothing healing potion; Mountain Fire mushrooms and Spears of Ashida produce a potent Flaming Oil Potion; Burdock Flowers and some Wild Parsley make a Flask of Unstable Energy (used to recharge three super moves; very important) and so on. How many potions you can make depends on how many recipes you have, which can only be purchased from *hidden* Tengu temples in exchange for shiny coins, hidden in vases and enemy encampments along with various bombs, shuriken and caltrops. It’s also a good idea to jump into your Tengu hat whenever you see a river disappear into a canyon; you can even jump from a high bridge or cliff and land in the water. Mini Ninja’s are light. Equip your fishing pole and catch some fish—sushi!

Exploring Mini Ninjas’ ever-changing wilderness

brought me back to the days of Jet Force Gemini and Ocarina of Time; there's something really special going on here that you need to check out for yourself. IO has captured the feeling of being a small fish in a big ocean and infused it with the most uppity warriors I think I've ever seen. The Mini Ninjas have some serious gameplay chops too; climbing and descending sheer walls and cliffs, jumping across chasms and rock faces, wall running and bounding...they're full-blown ninja—like Hayabusa Clan Mini-Mes.

Only Hiro can fight bosses though and for each one he defeats, the warlord sends another, more terrifying monstrosity, if you consider projectile fart clouds monstrous. It's only the one, and there's no potty humor—he's serious. It's his skill. The bosses on the whole are as fun to watch as they are to topple, and the finale is like, Ocarina good.

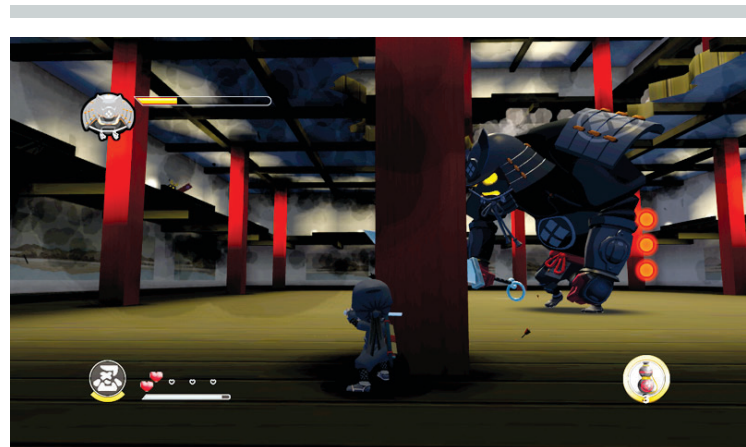
Hiro's ninja brethren can't use Kuji magic, but they can use the bombs, shuriken, caltrops, potions and brews that you find along the way (more exploring) and each ninja has a unique weapon/skill set and special power. Hiro is the all-around sword master and has a wicked multi-target special attack; Futo and his mallet are the only way to take down the game's giant samurai (after which Hiro can inhabit the freed bear and perform powerful attacks); Shun is a restless little archer that can shoot short range arrows on the run, plant and target far off enemies, or use a special exploding arrow that takes out multiple targets; Kunoichi wields a staff that's perfect for spearing samurai guards with lances and she's a great climber; Tora (who thinks he's a tiger) runs on all fours and uses his claws for quick

slashing attacks and as a rudder/prop for the Tengu hat; and cute little Suzume likes to play her flute and then beat Samurai with it, or better yet lull them into a stupor and then beat them with it. Ultimately it's up to you how to use your Mini Ninjas, although IO do a spectacular job in letting the topography speak for itself and you're never prodded on who to use or what to do; they give you the tools, you provide the talent.

Beyond the gameplay there's some Kuji magic in visual presentation too. The tech may appear simple, but the implementation is amazing; there's sooo much animation, and the lighting and other effects are en masse. We don't talk about music nearly enough these days. None of this would be effective if the music and sound didn't drive it. The traditional Japanese chimes and Edo period score is sweeping and the environmental sound design is award worthy. I put in at least 20 hours playing Mini Ninjas, which means it's probably more like 15. I searched high and low, did everything, and stopped to sight-see constantly. I fished a lot too. The Mini Ninjas don't just exceed expectations, they gang up on them, beat them, burn them, and then release them back into the wild. [play](#)

parting shot

Mini Ninjas is simply wonderful on PS3 and 360 (check my Wii score online). An original break-the-mold adventure filled with tight, constantly evolving action spread across 6 super cool ninja, and more (and better) exploration than the majority of open-worlds. Biggest surprise yet, this year.



Mini Ninja...BIG'ol Samurai.

...there's something really special going on here that you need to check out.



Need for Speed SHIFT

The frequency with which EA pushes out Need for Speed titles nearly matches the amount of keyboard-playing cat videos appearing on the Internet. And while I enjoyed last year's arcadey NfS: Undercover (the 19th entry at my last count), it seems I was in the minority, as the publisher has taken the keys to their over-saturated racing series from Black Box and turned them over to Slightly Mad Studios. In changing gears, they've fashioned a more focused title that has more in common with racing simulators such as Forza and Gran Turismo than with the cop-evading entries that put the franchise on the map.

The results might alienate fans looking for another pedal-to-the-medal weekend rental, but should please those craving a sim with some new tricks under the hood. SHIFT packs some significant differentiating features within its gameplay progression and visual style, both of which make it not necessarily better, but depending on your tastes, a worthy entry in this increasingly crowded genre. On the gameplay front, SHIFT's career mode plays more like an RPG; rather than requiring players to win every

What really kept my foot to the floor were the scary-real cockpit perspectives.

event, it grants Profile Points (like XP) for in-race style. So, trading paint, drifting, and drafting are just as important as being the first to the finish line. Achieving points earns you stars which, in turn, unlock new tiers of career-boosting events. Of course, you'll be collecting plenty of coin as well, so a car full of sweet rides is also tied to your success on the circuit.

I rarely complete careers in racing games, but SHIFT's RPG-like progression kept me engaged much longer than most because it was able to deliver that one-more-level addictiveness experienced in other XP-earning genres. What really kept my foot to the floor, though, were the scary-real cockpit perspectives. Sure, plenty of titles offer detail-drenched interiors, but SHIFT ups the ante—and the adrenaline—by making the driver more than just a spectator sitting in a slick ride. If you can pry your eyes off the rapidly approaching blacktop for a few seconds, you can move your head around; look to the floor for

a peek at your foot applying pressure to the gas pedal, or take a gander out the passenger side window if you want to watch the scenery fly by at 180 mph. Even cooler are the jarring crash effects from this first-person view. Slam into a guard rail, and your vision will blur, the gamepad will rumble, and you'll almost expect to feel your seat belt tug across your torso. If SHIFT were any more realistic, I'd have a lap full of scalding hot Dunkin' Donuts' coffee to contend with. [play](#)

parting shot

SHIFT will disappoint those looking for Maggie Q and cop chases, but racing sim fans, looking for a solid alternative to Forza and the like, should buckle-up for Need for Speed's new ride.

Style matters just as much as speed...





Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: SMASH-UP

They're still teenagers?

words Dave Halverson

I could just say that Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Smash-Up is Super Smash Bros. Brawl with Turtles for kids and fans of the 2007 TMNT movie and get back to unlocking Karai's bustiere. It's from the same people (give or take a few members of Team Ninja) and aside from a few unique modes, the Turtle-verse boasts the same easy-to-pick-up, not-so-easy to master controls, power-up/event laden gameplay and abundant unlockables, so, cut, print, that's a wrap, right? Well, not quite...

Much to my chagrin, Smash-Up doesn't incorporate a side-scrolling mission mode like SSBB's (I had high hopes) but there's still a ton to do. There is a Missions Mode, but it's really more of a 10-stage training sequence to familiarize you with the controls (and unlock the

April Showered...



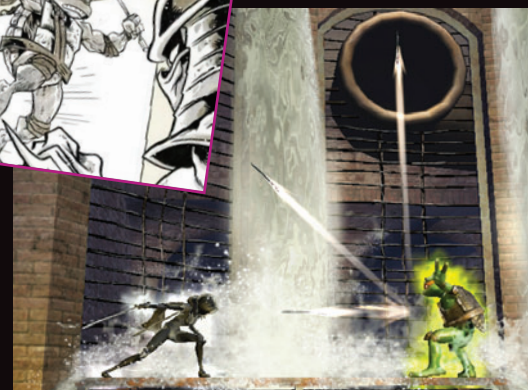
Enemy Base level). The crème de la modes in Smash-Up are: Arcade, your standard story mode made ultra-cool by way of a great cine-comic circa Jim Lawson's 1992 Shades of Gray with multiple endings; Battle Royal, customizable 1-4 player last fighter standing matches; and the Bonus Stages, pseudo-zero gravity jumping madness and other such controller heaving exercises (wear the strap) that will take even the most fervent SSB Brawlers to task. The rest—Swap Out, Mission, Survival, and Tournament—need no introduction, but there is a Trophy Room where you can shoot your way to earning a quiver of cool action-figures. Smash-Up also introduces a multitude of new play mechanics, like air and ground-based slip-dodges, wall-cling attacks, tag throws, crate hurling and kicking, and the option to target and shoot power-ups to toggle their jitsu; all of which keep the fighting certified fresh. And it looks as good if not better than Brawl; one of the best looking games on the system with hands-down the best models. If only it had the freeze frame/snapshot feature, my life would be complete. OK, not really. In fact to be honest, as much as I like Smash-Up and welcome it to the Wii with open arms, I can't help but look at this amazing Wii-tech and elite new studio and not wish I was controlling these characters in a full-blown Ubisoft quality action adventure. What I wouldn't give for a T-Rated TMNT action/platformer with some bite, or better yet (much better) an M-rated TMNT based on the Bisley/Eastman Bodycount series. Remember them? In fact, doesn't Mr. Eastman publish an adult illustrated fantasy magazine... Based on Smash-Up's marketing campaign,

One of the best looking games on the system with hands-down the best 3D models.

which targets "children," I fear the Ubisoft brass may have the idea that TMNT is strictly kid stuff. If so, I wholeheartedly disagree. I believe that they can have their kid-friendly fighter cash and eat it too. Batman is doing OK with us grown-ups.

Since Smash-Up is technically for kids though, we gave it to our team of 8 and 9 year-old gamers (who've unlocked more characters in SSBB than probably Nintendo knows about; seriously, these kids scare me) who proceeded to unlock 22 of the games 36 unlockables in 3 hours. They definitely approve, although they were lukewarm until they unlocked Utrominator and Nightwatcher (not because they know them from the series however, but because they're "robots") and a gaggle of costumes. While they all agreed that Smash-Up is cool, they also all agreed that SSBB is better, and then proceeded to put on a clinic to show us why (who knew Kirby could be such a badass?).

In the end they liked what we liked about Smash-Up (although we're the bigger TMNT fans): the graphics, the interactive stage design (save for the alligator—if only the Wii zapper had



real bullets...) that has you break through walls and floors into sub-levels, the unique moves and dynamic stances, the mini-games, and picking new characters from Splinter's trophy case after each victory in Arcade Mode. At around 10 minutes per play through however, times the six available spaces (it's a small shelf) well; do the math. But these games aren't about length; they're about spending hour upon hour, day after day in front of the flatty unlocking new stuff, and so far so good. It's been three days since the big play test and our 8-year-old still puts in an hour or two a day. What the kids didn't like, and I still see the odd Wiimote flying, was the jumping (it's floaty and sticky) and the pole grabbing/swinging and releasing physics—having the grab on the heavy attack button is awkward and no matter where you release in the swinging arc you either go right, left or down. The stages also lack the scale of SSBB's, but make up for it with some cool set pieces and interactive elements; the cruise ship to whale transition being the overall favorite. Not a lot of complaints.

As far as the brand goes, our kids like the CGI movie, although they wish it had a bit more violence (they really like violence) but see the "old" Fox cartoon as strictly toddler fare.

We showed them Body Count and they went nuts...

Following the rushed but descent TMNT movie game, I had high hopes that Ubisoft would put some muscle back into the franchise, and so far, so good. Smash-Up is a pretty great fighter, so if they follow up with a quality action adventure for the upcoming live-action movie, everyone will be happy; the kids they think want E-rated easy games, and everyone else.

I just hope that the powers that be at Imagi listen to the producers like they didn't with TMNT when Kevin Munroe and Tom Tanaka begged for a PG-13. We live in an age of accelerated youth, it's time the game and movie companies caught up, or better yet, manned up. I don't care how gnarly you make TMNT, Mom will buy it with a big nostalgic smile on her unknowing face. So in conclusion, Game Arts' new team has mad skills, Smash-Up is among the top three best Wii fighters going, and Karai is the best thing to happen to body armor since Samus took her helmet off. No bustiere though...but she sure looks good in gold! [play](#)

parting shot

I want a TMNT action game that looks like the new Prince of Persia, but in the meantime I don't think anyone could ask for a better All-Ages TMNT fighter. Plus, the power-ups don't fly around like drunk fairies! Now where are those Stone Generals...

review Nostalgia

System: DS Developer: Matrix Software/Tecmo Publisher: Ignition Multi: N/A ESRB: E Available: October 20

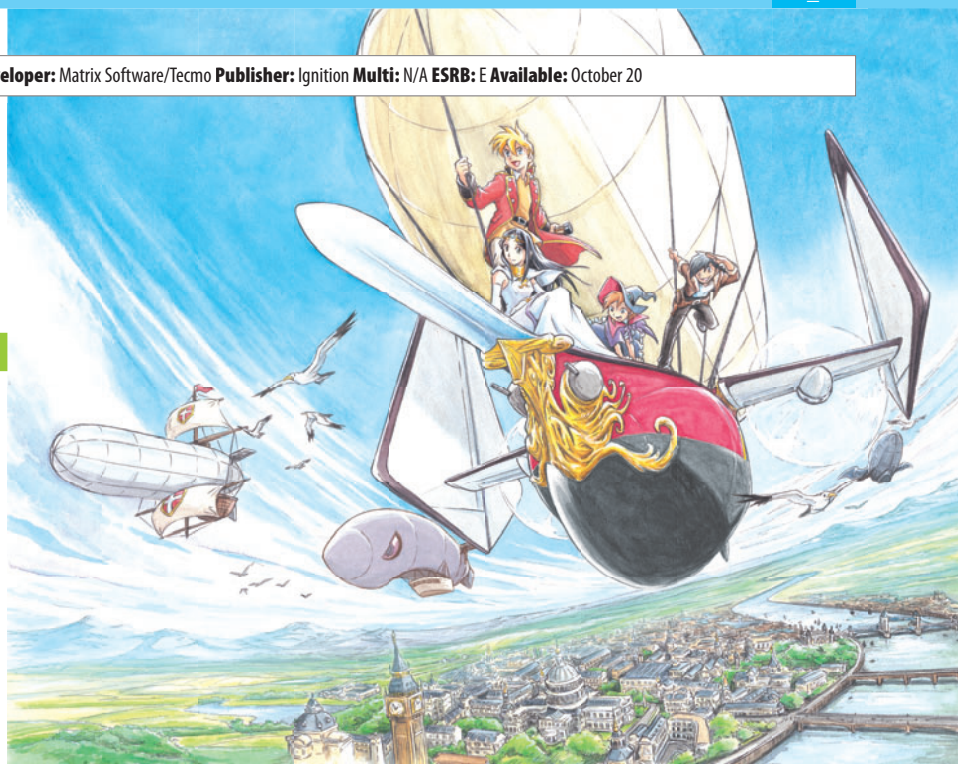
Nostalgia

This is what memories play like.

words Heather Anne Campbell

I know I've been here before. I feel ... a disorienting sense of déjà vu. A turn-based RPG, with a *Sphere Grid* style ability development system, where I begin my quest by hunting sewer rats, and end it by exploring hidden bases in familiar landmarks. I'm looking for my father, and along my journey, I'll be joined by a group of misfits and squat-bodied side-kicks, all of whom express emotions in a single set of iconic gestures.

It's called *Nostalgia* because of what it evokes: A tradition of strong, simple Japanese Role Playing games. Developed with the help of Naoki Morita (Sakura Taisen) and Keisuke Kikuchi (Fatal Frame), *Nostalgia*'s strength is built on the foundation of twenty-plus years of Japanese RPGs. Where it treads on familiar ground, it does so by choice. But *Nostalgia* goes a step beyond *Final Fantasies* and *Dragon Quests*, by setting its story on an alternate Earth. No matter how interesting a sci-fi palace may be, it's more compelling to walk the streets of New York or London,



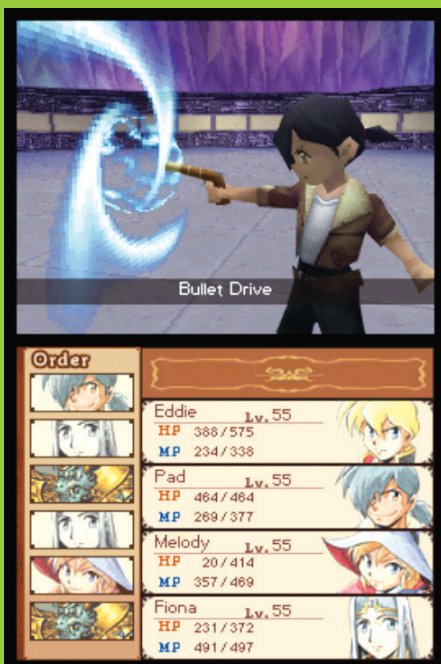
investigating the secrets under our own feet. It's why *Harry Potter* or *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* appeal to us; the implication is real magic, right on the other side of the fence.

You're Eddie Brown, son of famous adventurer Gilbert Brown, and you sign up to become an explorer like your father as soon as he goes missing. Soon, you meet Fiona, a girl who has been exploited for the gain of your father's organization, and Melody, a rambunctious wizard with no friends. Yeah, the worst part of *Nostalgia* are the one-dimensional characters.

But the best part is *Airship Battles*! Typically, the pleasure of getting an airship in JRPGs is that you no longer fight random battles on the world map. In *Nostalgia*, being on your ship

means *fighting in the skies*. Your cruiser (the *Maverick*) has a single HP meter, and each member of your party handles a different aspect of the ship's defense or offense. When your character levels up, you have the choice to apply your bonuses to personal or airship gain. Here's a hint: Level Up Your Airship. You're gonna get your ass handed to you if you don't. [play](#)

Nostalgia's strength is built on the foundation of twenty-plus years of Japanese RPGs.



Where's my Red Mage?



parting shot

This is how you do the basics. Solid, familiar JRPG that is better-than-good. And you get to fly around the earth in an awesome airship!

System: DS Developer: 5th Cell Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Multi: Online Level Sharing ESRB: E Available: September 15

Scribblenauts review

Scribblenauts

The Beginning of Something New

words Heather Anne Campbell



Scribblenauts is a game that will be remembered for a long time. It's a genesis event. In the history of games, there are few moments where a new genre appears; few dates where something truly novel is given to gamers. Scribblenauts is a birth. It's Wolfenstein 3D. It's Mario 64. Scribblenauts is Street Fighter.

As everyone now knows, Scribblenauts is a two-dimensional, semi-side-scrolling adventure game where puzzles and objectives are completed via the conjuring of objects. A notepad in the corner of the screen is the conveyor belt between our imaginations and the play-field; our stylus the only way to interact with those objects and the

world. Maxwell, a young boy in a rooster hat, is collecting Starites, and we're a god of gods. A Starite is at the top of a tree. A Starite is beyond an enemies' armed front lines. A Starite is in a museum, under the glare of security guards. How will we unite Maxwell and his desires?

At first, we'll write Fishing Pole, a lot. We'll use Wings and Jet Packs and Guns. We'll limit ourselves, because we're used to playing games as quickly—as efficiently—as possible. But soon, we'll stare down the barrel of boredom. Then, finally, we'll engage our imaginations. We'll start to have fun. We'll seek out the edges of the game's vocabulary, we'll see just what we can glue to what, what we can assemble and screw with. Do Dinosaurs eat Donuts? Can we give a Dog Steroids?

Does God get hungry?

Soon, we'll be designing our own levels, modifying the world to make Rube Goldberg machines, seeing how far we can push. Scribblenauts ups the ante from Little Big Planet, because we aren't just limited to what the designers give us. We're limited by nothing.

Sure, there are frustrations here. Control is the first and most glaring problem in the game. Getting Maxwell from one place to another, using the items we provide him with, is an obvious shortcoming of the game. The physics of the game are unstable; sometimes, we can cheat our way through a room just by jumping at something until we slip past it. Scribblenauts isn't perfect; it's just audacious and unique. I wish I could manipulate Maxwell with the D-Pad. But then again, we're not really controlling the child; we're maestros, conducting

Maxwell, a young boy in a rooster hat, is collecting Starites, and we're a god of gods.

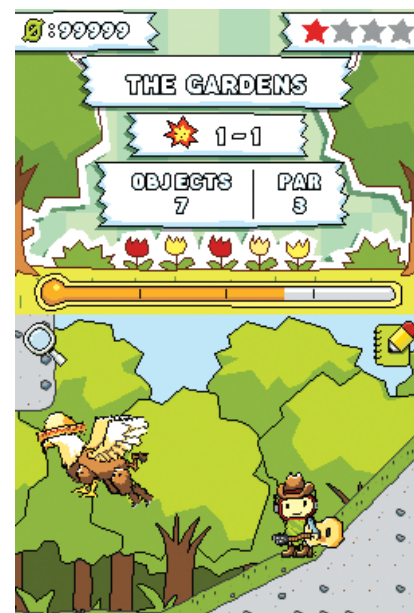
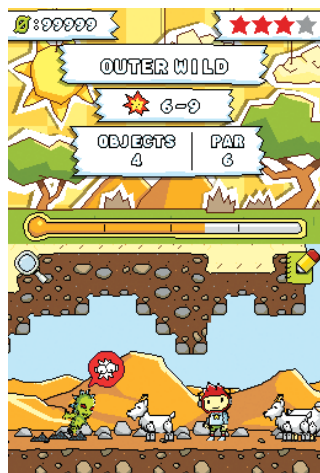


the orchestra his reality.

Scribblenauts is a game for writers and children. For artists and dreamers. For violent types that want to see how many weapons can be modified, made more dangerous. It's an exploration of your inhibitions, your limitations. More than Brain Age, Scribblenauts begs you to think for yourself, to rouse your imagination from its decades-long slumber. It's a game which is only as small as you are. [play](#)

parting shot

Indispensable.



Think it. Imagine it.
Draw it. Enjoy it.

Shin Megami Tensei

Persona

Mark danced crazy, as the world fell to ruin...

words Eric L. Patterson

In 1988, I played a relatively unknown Master System RPG titled Phantasy Star, and it forever changed me as a fan of video games. Then, eight years later, another Japan-born role-playing romp would come along and leave an equally impactful mark on my life; the similarly obscure Atlus release Revelations: Persona.

Phantasy Star taught me that I loved JRPGs; Persona taught me what I wanted from them.

The harsh reality about games we used to love is that often that love can be questioned should we actually view them again with more mature eyes. For this reason, I was honestly hesitant to go back and revisit Persona via its PSP rebirth. The truth, I told myself, was that more likely than not, the game wouldn't have stood the test of time as much as I might hope.

Boy, was I wrong. It probably took me all of about ten minutes to get back into the flow of Persona's gameplay, and soon a feeling of shock came over me. Here I was, playing a thirteen-year-old RPG—a genre notorious for titles that end up feeling outdated a few years from launch—and I couldn't believe how amazing and engrossing it still was.

The elements that cast their spell over my younger self—the group of every-day high schoolers dragged into something bigger than themselves, the dark and twisted storyline, the shocking (to me, at the time) level of demon interaction—it's all still there, and every bit as enthralling as it was the first time around. Even more than that, however, was the realization that I was finally, after thirteen years, *truly* playing Persona. Yes, for this new PSP remake, Atlus has polished some things, added others and made for an overall better experience; and all of that is much appreciated. For us in the West, however, the biggest benefit we now receive is the chance to finally, after all this time, play the true and definitive version of the game. When it was released in 1996, the version of Persona we were given by Atlus USA was a Persona that had been heavily edited, and which had even seen its optional "Snow Queen Quest" storyline completely ripped out.

So, for me, this wasn't just a question of playing some new release in order to write this review; it was the chance to finish what I had started so long ago. Even as it existed then, flawed and fragmented, the me from 1996 loved Persona from the minute he stepped foot into the halls of St. Hermelin High.

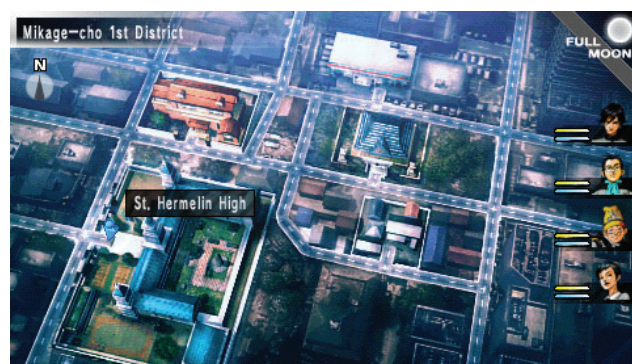
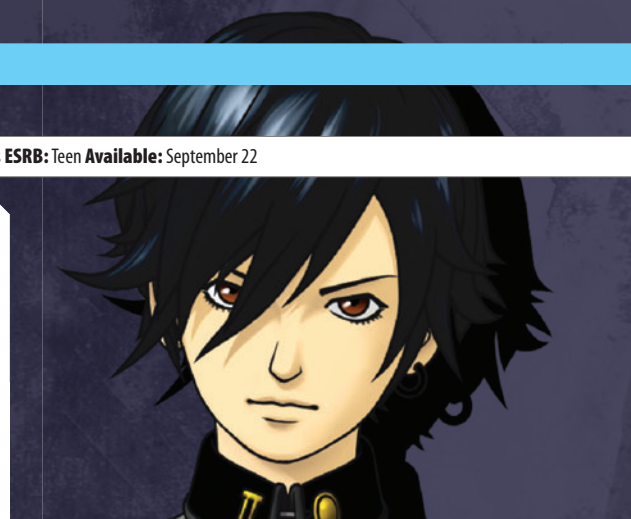
Now, at last, I could once and for all complete the journey that *that* me had embarked on.

While I am waxing poetic about my adoration for Persona, however, let me be very clear on what it is—and what it isn't. If you've come to be a fan of the series thanks to its PlayStation 2 chapters, then this original episode of the saga could very well feel like a punch to the face and a boot to the crotch. All the fun you've had getting chummy with the guys and gals surrounding your virtual self via the Social Link system is nowhere to be seen; and if you found Persona 3's Tartarus to be a long, drawn-out dungeon-crawling experience, the 3D dungeons present here will derive devilish pleasure from kicking your ass and taking your name.

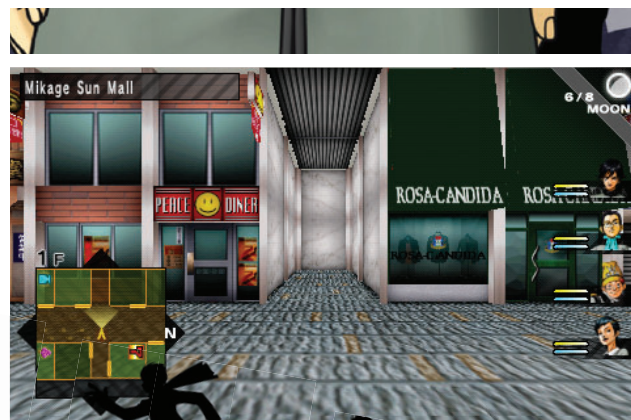
Simply put, you cannot go into Persona expecting the same kind of experience from the series that you can legitimately expect today. Persona looks, feels, and plays like an RPG from the days when RPGs were old-school, hard-core, and not afraid to make you work for everything that you earned. The game's revival is a long-overdue event, and a wonderful way to go back and see the origins of the Persona franchise (or replay those origins for us longtime fans). Make no mistake, however—a love for where the series is *now* does not guarantee you'll enjoy what it was *then*. [play](#)

parting shot

The story that launched the series, finally presented to us Americans in the way it was always meant to be seen. Though I love what the Persona series has become, I will always adore this original chapter; and it's still a hell of an experience even after all these years.



The all-new, much more visually impressive overworld map.



Prices so high they're practically demonic!



Phantasy Star taught me that I loved JRPGs;
Persona taught me what I
wanted from them.

review

System: PSP Developer: Project Soul Publisher: Namco ESRB: T Available: September 1

Soulcalibur: Broken Destiny

The God of War Wants Your Soul

Given the jaw-to-the-floor presentation of last year's Soulcalibur IV, it seemed unlikely a portable version of the weapons-based brawler would be able to match the gameplay or visuals of that polished production. But I'll be damned to an eternity on the receiving end of a Soul Crush if Broken Destiny didn't continually sting my senses with the gameplay depth and graphical power of a console-quality experience.

In fact, given Broken Destiny's inclusion of almost

Given the content, it's surprising they dropped the "IV" from the title.

all the content—characters, play modes, levels—it's surprising they dropped the "IV" from the title. Obviously, the visuals have to take a hit, but they still rank as some of the best to ever fill the PSP's widescreen. And the gameplay, from the variety of modes to the intuitive controls, is spot-on. Best of all, the fighters from a "galaxy far, far away" have been replaced by the much more appropriate Kratos. **Matt Cabral**

parting shot

The premier weapon-wielding fighter jumps to the portable with nary a hitch. Oh, and you can kick pretty-boy Siegfried's ass as Kratos!



review

System: NDS Developer: Hit Maker Publisher: NIS America Inc. Multi: 1p ESRB: E Available: October 6

A Witch's Tale

The Not-at-all Worst Witch

A Witch's Tale has an unfortunate problem: it offers up a ridiculously terrible first chapter, one which can be so frustrating, confusing, and obnoxious that some players may completely give up during its first couple of hours. Which, really, is a shame, because once you get to the game's second area, nearly everything makes a huge change for the better, as world design improves, you gain the power to make quicker work of the previously overly-long random encounters, and the game becomes what it should have been from the start: fun.

Though I was never able to shake the feeling that the genre shift A Witch's Tale went through during its develop-

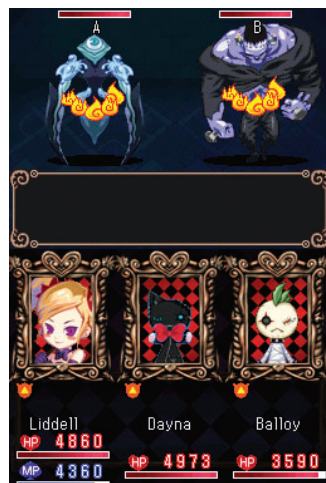
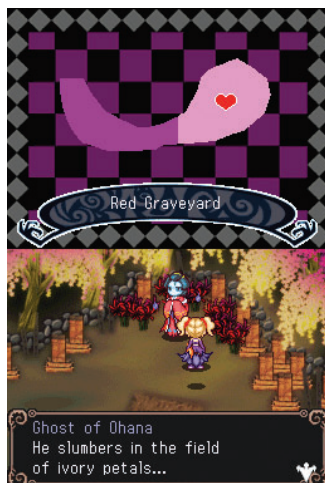
By the time the end credits rolled, I was ready to play through the game again.

ment kept the game from reaching its full potential, the charm of our heroine Liddell and the lands and characters she comes across during her adventures won me over. By the time the end credits rolled, I was ready to play through the game again, eager to unlock the storyline's secrets that lay just out of reach the first time around. **Eric L. Patterson**



parting shot

A Witch's Tale is like my '98 Neon: some parts are beautiful, some are an eyesore, some work great, some need fixing, but they all still come together for a (mostly) enjoyable ride.



review

Resident Evil 5

System: PC Developer: Capcom Publisher: Capcom Multi: 2p co-op Available: September



Resident Evil 5

Beautiful on PC...in 3D!

words Mike Griffin

As evidenced by the superb Windows editions of Devil May Cry 4 and Street Fighter IV, Capcom is quickly becoming a master of PC. Instead of lazy direct ports from console, the publisher has its teams go above and beyond for PC, capitalizing on superior technology to refurbish hits with enhanced visuals, options and modes. The trend continues in the PC edition of Resident Evil 5, and this time out Capcom has also embraced Nvidia's 3D Vision to deliver—quite possibly—the most impressive application of stereoscopic 3D this generation.

While it's playable with either an Xbox 360 controller or mouse and keyboard (and you can swap on-the-fly, mid-game), I approached RE 5 as a PC-grounded desktop experience. With a good high DPI mouse, the game's shooting action has seriously never felt better. Dial-in



the action keys and quick-turn, and suddenly RE 5 becomes significantly more precise than its console counterparts thanks to the speedy mouselook, easy chaining of actions, and lightning-fast use of menus and consumables. For PC gamers coming to RE 5 for the first time, yes, it's still that chunky, classic Resident Evil character movement, but RE 5 loads you up with fun stuns, area of effect knockbacks, and brutal grabs and close-range power attacks in solo and co-op (online, LAN) flavors.

You've certainly never seen a more stunning version of RE 5. If you have the computational fortitude to run the game at high resolutions in its DirectX 10 mode, these wonderfully optimized and lovingly textured visuals will blow you away on PC. The Majini-infested African shanty towns, ruins and facilities look outstanding in this beautified remix, and the mega-crisp graphics make those 3D Vision effects pop out of the screen—from raging chainsaw mutants, to dust and gore flying in and out of view. This is also the

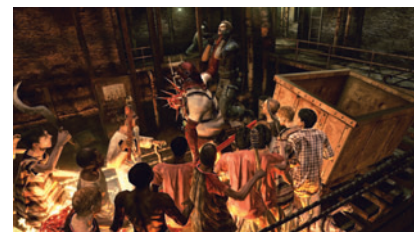
first game in history to support stereoscopic 3D in every one of its splendidly animated cutscenes. The 3D Vision crown has officially been passed from Left 4 Dead to Resident Evil 5.

Capcom completes an excellent PC version of RE 5 with the expanded Mercenaries mode (featuring even thicker Majini waves) and new costumes for protagonists Chris Redfield and Sheva Alomar. If it's striking survival horror you crave on PC and stuff like co-op gameplay is important to you, RE 5 cannot be denied. [play](#)

parting shot

Resident Evil 5 should be the perfect type of game to use with 3D Vision glasses, and now we can confirm that it is. With upgraded textures and effects, new Mercenary modes and character costumes, and superior control options, it's another outstanding PC outing for Capcom.

Wonderfully optimized and lovingly textured visuals will blow you away on PC.



System: PC, Xbox 360 **Developer:** 8monkey Labs **Publisher:** Phantom EFX/Valcon **Multi:** SP only **Available:** September

Darkest of Days **review**

Darkest of Days

Time is on your side

words Mike Griffin

If I had time travel technology, I might roll back the calendar to earlier this year, when I recognized potential in *Darkest of Days*, the epoch-hopping historical shooter by Phantom EFX and 8monkey Labs. I would offer some advice to the team to help DoD withstand the test of time and the trial of critics. Alas, the real world has no KronoteK technology, and in the present, this fragmented FPS survives uneven AI and presentation thanks only to its unyielding pace through torrid historical chaos.

My first warning to potential *Darkest of Days* players is to expect a minimal wrapper for the experience. No thrilling intro, barebones menus and options (even on PC, where many keys and mouse buttons are ineligible for re-assignment), and very bland interfaces across the board, punctuated by the jarring, insultingly plain "...you have died..." death screen. The game will undoubtedly take some heat for its weak surface frills. DoD's

Shoulder-to-shoulder with hordes of characters in the midst of famous discord.



presentation is also a mixed bag. The music has the right rumbling tempo, but lack of variety and over-synthy strings diminish the din. Main characters (highlighted by your partner, Dexter) are generally well-voiced, however Phantom EFX allows far too many sub-par performers to chime in with poorly delivered bit roles.

This proprietary Marmoset graphics engine is clearly a good kit for rendering tons of characters in large outdoor landscapes, complete with lovely shadows. For the PC version you have superior atmospheric effects (via PhysX on a GeForce card) like falling leaves and foggy trenches that are fully reactive to gunfire and explosions. Packing dozens and dozens of characters on screen takes a toll on the game's LoD choices, with fairly short flora draw-in range and distractingly blobby forests off in the distance. Most character models are pretty light on complexity, stiffly animated, and in really dense encounters you'll notice AI oddities and shut downs.

DoD recovers through its action: placing you shoulder-to-shoulder with hordes of characters in the midst of famous discord and carnage. This is where the game gets under your skin: Dashing through a mountain pass as droves of hollering Union troops and Indians chase each other on horseback; cracking a 19th century musket in a rigid firing line formation across

PhysX
by NVIDIA **DARKEST OF DAYS**

It's performance-intensive, but if you're equipped to play the PC version of *Darkest of Days* with PhysX enabled, expect some curious interactive effects.

the vast war torn South; sneaking a high-tech futuristic mortar launcher into WW1 to terrorize Tannenberg with hellfire from heaven; staging an intense mid-winter jail break in a grim WW2 POW camp, flanked by electric fences, slaver guard dogs, and little hope. And witnessing absolute bedlam on the streets of ancient, volcanic Pompeii, ash filling the sky like snowflakes as you and KronoteK interlopers pound each other with ordnance and flames (using the lovely Face Melting Gun).

Darkest of Days does a respectable job linking each of its historical combat expeditions, painting the permutations, good and bad, of your previous time hops. Wear blinders to mute its many frailties as you race through history, and DoD's rapid course of action can satisfy shooter cravings. The 10-ish hour campaign and total absence of multiplayer will, however, amplify DoD's faults and call into question its full price tag. [play](#)

parting shot

Darkest of Days is like a good cable special, not a great theatrical release. A budget for extras, sound, sets and effects that would impress for TV, but is miles away from the Bruckheimer box office bash it yearns to be.



The Aion launch report

Everything you need to know before spreading your wings in Aion

Earlier this year, Aion surpassed four million subscribers in the East, with more regions, like Thailand and Japan, now entering service. It's our turn next. Aion will be going live in North America just as you read this, after months of beta testing, a hopelessly sold-out Collector's Edition box, and chart-topping Steam pre-purchases.

Aion's popularity in the West surged this summer following the announcement that it would launch at version 1.5, subtitled Shadow of the Balaur. Adding a host of new environments, quests, and re-worked systems, the update includes tons of content for Elyos and Asmodian players. We spoke in-depth about 1.5's features with Aion's Associate Producer, Lani Blazier, on the brink of release.

Interview

Lani Blazier Associate Producer, NCsoft



play: In the realm of MMO localization, it's quite a feat to launch Aion at version 1.5—the same version as its Korean counterpart. This is months and months of work released over three big patches. How much influence did the NCsoft West team have on the updates leading to 1.5?

Lani Blazier: Aion version 1.5 is the culmination of the feedback for and from the Westernization of Aion. It is the version we feel is best representative of Aion for our market. We could have released the game starting from earlier versions, but we wanted to put our best foot forward, and for us, that is definitely version 1.5.

Why did you decide to cut out the lag time between international versions?

We're trying to keep our game versions as close in release to the Korean version because it's important to our community, and because it's more efficient to our internal publishing process. Supporting multiple versions of Aion is actually extra work for the development team; it's not ideal for anyone. That said, there will always be a little time between updates to allow for high quality, culturally appropriate localization.

This is pretty typical of game updates coming out of Asia, especially MMOs heading to the West. What kind of time offset are you hoping to nail down for Aion?

We hope to keep the time offset to a maximum of one to two months. Quality assurance and production do their best to minimize this time offset, but in the end it's vital to us to deliver a consistently top-quality, polished game. The production team members at NCsoft West are in constant contact with the development team in Seoul and we will continue to put forth our players' ideas to make the best game possible for both East and West. The impact that Western players have on Aion's development doesn't end with version 1.5.

That's a very reasonable time gap between global versions. Let's talk about the content in 1.5. You've improved the questing experience for levels 20 to 50 and added another hundred quests. Are these quests designed to smooth the leveling curve or bolster the storyline?

All three of our major updates each provided a big

"I really enjoy the Dark Poeta instance. It re-imagines the zone as if it had been taken over by the Balaur."

Lani Blazier Associate Producer, NCsoft

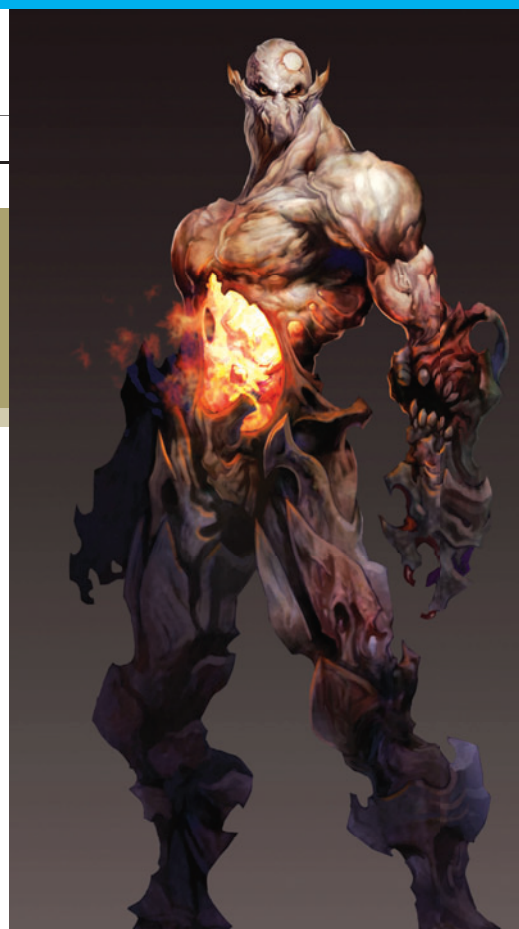
boost in terms of content, and since we're launching in the West with all three updates, we feel the experience is pretty solid all the way through. We give players abundant content and story to journey through levels 1–50. We want everyone to enjoy exploring all the lore. Each update filled in tons of content in the level 20–50 range. This includes new quests, instances, and even completely rebuilt zones. We also adjusted experience for quests through the entire game, and really tried to make sure players always have something new and exciting to do. Our campaign quests give players a good central story arc to follow and guide them through their level progression.

You still see MMO players polarized by the whole PvE or PvP thing...

The nice thing about Aion is that players have the choice of what playstyle they want to engage in from one moment to another, whether it's PvPvE, world PvP, or even instanced PvP. We try not to punish players for their play preferences or to funnel players into one specific area. Instead, we let them glide between different playstyles and content without penalty. Personally, I love in-depth play with Legion PvP in the Abyss.

Aion also has open world PvP against players arriving through rifts. What's the most rewarding PvP action in 1.5, open world or Legion battles in the Abyss?

The most rewarding PvP action will certainly be in the



Into the wild: Aion features a ton of frenetic PvP and epic party encounters, but it also endorses quiet, progressive evenings soloing with your character—questing, slaying and crafting as you explore new lands. The game isn't plagued by weak, overtly-group dependent character classes.



time and ended up in an epic battle with... a *whelp*. Those that take the time to clear the instance and truly rid the lands of the Balaur get a *much* more epic encounter!

So the world expands in 1.5 with the new instances, Abyss encounters, new world zones. I'm curious about this expandability: Do you add new persistent areas to existing world regions, or will new content be largely instanced-based?

With version 1.5 the world of Aion expanded in both its persistent world and instances, and the development team has flexibility in deciding what, and how, new areas are added to the game. But we don't want to just throw new maps or instances into the game. We want to make sure that expanded areas fit within the story and lore of Ateia.

That brings to mind a community wish list favorite: Swimming and underwater gameplay. Right now there's no reason to have this in Aion, since there's no gameplay there, but you guys have confirmed it's on the to-do list...

I think players understand our intent is that each content addition will be well-thought out in design and will work seamlessly with the game. The development team is keenly aware of the community's desires, I assure you of that! Swimming wasn't included in this latest update because there was no reason to swim outside of a pretty animation. We feel that there needs to be game design elements that incorporate swimming, such as content around or below water, to merit adding swimming into the game.

Well, CryEngine does lovely water, so count my vote for swimming mischief. If it's executed as well as Aion's flying, it'll be good to go. It's nice that the team in Seoul is so open to these big wishes. They kind of gave you guys carte blanche on the localization too...

Yeah, we put a huge amount of effort into localizing and making Aion culturally relevant for our Western audience. We have a team of fourteen fantasy authors who have been reworking the lore, quests, NPC dialog, voiceover scripts, and UI. A direct translation wasn't going to be good enough. We wanted players to be *connected* to the words they were reading—for the story to evoke emotion and to impart a meaningful experience. The Korean text had many jokes, cultural references and stories that were very relevant to the audience it was written for, but not so much for the West. I think you find that sort of thing is true for any language. For example, a joke in French is not necessarily funny when translated into German.

A lot of MMO vets will appreciate this extra effort, because we've had way too many localization tragedies in this genre. I think Aion is going to pull in a lot of first-time MMO players too. Have you improved the mythical "new player experience" for the Western launch of Aion?

Absolutely. We implemented an interactive tutorial system. We avoided the *wall-of-text* type tutorials and instead have short videos within the game that demonstrate full functionality. Veteran MMO players can quickly dismiss these videos, but players who are new to the MMO genre will find them very helpful and I think this is a really big quality of life enhancement.

Another difference between our Aion and other



Abyss. It's the heart of PvPvE and is the *true* PvP area. Meaning, if you fly into the Abyss, you can expect to encounter PvP action.

The Abyss makes sense, since it's the home of the major NPC foe, the Balaur. What does a player actually earn for kicking ass in Aion's PvP, compared to exploring the lands questing—XP towards character level, access to elite gear and skills?

Players will earn level XP, Abyss points, and Abyss rankings for PvP. Progressing through ranks gives a character some cool high-level skills. For example, there's one that gives you the qualities of a raid boss: you become huge, with the ability to take on and deal out a ton of damage. PvP success will also offer titles with perks, and access to some great high-end gear and consumables.

Every type of player loves a good dungeon crawl, and Shadow of the Balaur adds, what—about a dozen epic high-level party instances? What's one of your favorite new instances, and what kind of tactics go into beating it?

I really enjoy the Dark Poeta instance, which is new in version 1.5. It is a throwback to your early levels in Poeta. It re-imagines the zone as if it had been taken over by the Balaur. You get to battle a few mini-bosses and hordes of Balaur. Killing these Balaur gives you party points, and these points end up determining the end boss encounter. I totally rushed through to the end of this instance one

"The impact that western players have on Aion's development doesn't end with version 1.5."

Lani Blazier Associate Producer, NCsoft



territories might be your commitment to interacting with the player base; not just the forum discussions and Twitter updates. It's the promise of in-game events. I missed it myself, but I heard the US team tested the waters this summer in beta...

We held a beta event where players interacted with Aiva of the Asmodians [star of her own DC comic], and Kratheon of the Elyos. Both of them led players through an intense battle with the Balaur. It was a lot of fun, and from the feedback we've received, players are genuinely excited about participating in more events.

Keep 'em coming. Especially in the West, online players have a special appreciation for live events and GM interactions. And you have some great lore to work with here. Thanks for the chat, Lani! Perhaps we'll see you in the Abyss... [play](#)



A fearsome mage prepares a spell to put these golden Sanctum templars in a deep slumber.

Initial impressions

As fantasy MMO titles go, Aion feels exotic and new. It treats you to one of the deepest character creators in the genre, with vast morphology of body and facial features, then immediately launches into unconventional fantasy themes and palettes. Aion's edition of CryEngine is brilliantly optimized, so the vast majority of players will enter the game with buttery smooth framerates—and that's a very satisfying greeting.

Yes, we see some concessions in the complexity of Aion's world upon close inspection, but these are beautiful fantasy tableaus when absorbed as a whole, guided by great art direction. Who knew that a modified Far Cry engine could be so artistically effective, and offer such great performance, in a massively multiplayer game? Lovely character detail as well, with expressive faces and emotes, sweeping skirts, and elaborate normal-mapped armor that's worth collecting. As for the other "lag," network performance, I can't vouch for the stability of the live servers, but the Western betas were smooth. You should expect a fair bit of newbie zone congestion during launch week, however.

Every element of Aion's early game, from UI, tutorials and cinematics, to its progressively tougher exploration and combat, is undeniably polished and intuitive. Characters are well-animated, battles invoke satisfying chain attacks for all classes, and NPCs select tactics and positions that make sense. You have thousands of surprisingly well-written quests to run, and shortly after securing your wings (and discovering the silly fun of gliding everywhere), PvP will become a serious option with extensive challenges and rewards.



From DC Comics' Wildstorm Studios, the limited edition Aion comic, "Aiva's Story."



The LFG and guild tools aren't the best I've seen, yet they're perfectly competent facilitators for forming and managing groups or Legions.

Aion doesn't dramatically re-write any MMO rules, but it's the most polished release the West has seen since WoW. It presents unique themes and visuals, excellent RPG systems and gameplay, good localization, and—thanks to 1.5's major updates—an enormous amount of content to experience. It also has one of the best soundtracks to ever grace the genre. Could we finally, *seriously* have a real competitor for World of Warcraft? **Mike Griffin**

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Before the release of *Evangelion 1.0: You Are (Not) Alone*, director Hideaki Anno stated:

In the past 12 years, there has been no anime newer than *Eva*.

He was right. *Evangelion* represented a paradigm-shift for anime. An instant classic, *Evangelion* took what anime was, and made more out of it. The series injected desperate nihilism into the sophomoric giant robot genre, incorporated Existentialist self-doubt into the pop-art iconography of two-dimensional children, and lacquered the whole with obtuse religious symbolism. *Evangelion* danced on the line between parody and homage, between depth and immaturity. It was melodramatic, cheap, and *new*.

Hideaki Anno loves anime. He wants it to be greater than it is. He sees a grand vision for the form, something that is both accessible and informative. *Evangelion* is a work that strives for this; a show designed to make money and sell toys, while telling us a great story. Anno hoped for the form to follow his lead.

It didn't.

With few exceptions, today's anime is frightened,

tentative, afraid to take bold action and break out of the mold. Young *moé* girls, maids, and empty genre shows clutter our collections, pulling anime's average toward a lower common denominator. Series like *Death Note* and *Honey and Clover* are infrequent reminders of anime's greater degradation.

And so, in direct answer to this puerility, in defiance of anime's decade-long depression, Anno has taken up *Evangelion* again. He broadcasts the same message, shouted louder.

"*Evangelion 1.0* was made out of the desire to fight the continuing trend of stagnation in anime," declared Anno. "The desire to connect today's exhausted Japanese animation [industry] to the future."

"We aim to create a form of entertainment that anyone can look forward to; one that people who have never seen *Evangelion* can easily adjust to, one that can engage audiences as a movie for theatres, and one that produces a new understanding of the world."

Having seen *Evangelion 1.0*, I can easily say that he's on his way to accomplishing his goal.

Evangelion 1.0 is the way we remember *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. It appears as a remastered version of our favorite game, a Criterion edition, or an album re-recorded in higher fidelity, with additional tracks.

If we brush up on our *Eva* beforehand, we may be a little disappointed. Though the original show is still an opus, there's a little rust forming on the edges. Sliding our original series *Evangelion* discs into our players, we're met with a show that is unfortunately beginning to show its age. The lines are thick and inconsistent, the animation is cheap and often off-model.

You Are (Not) Alone brings *Evangelion* back into our brains with renewed clarity. Showing the movie to friends recalls the glory days in the late 90s when we had something worth sharing. This is what anime is supposed to be like.

This first film in a planned series of four, *You Are (Not)*

Evangelion 1.0 You are (Not) Alone

DEATH AND REBIRTH AND REBIRTH AND REBIRTH

words Heather Anne Campbell

Looking better than
you remember.

And so, in direct answer
to this puerility, in
defiance of anime's
decade-long depression,
Anno has taken up
Evangelion again.

Alone retells and re-arranges the introductory six episodes of the 1996 series, with extremely faithful animation that honors the shot-framing and storyboarding of the original. Shinji is a fourteen-year-old boy who has been forced to pilot a dangerous giant robot. He is the last line of defense between the Earth and the Angels—mysterious beings bent on mankind's destruction. His mother-figure Misato, is an alcoholic coward with a tendency for rash decision-making. His father is nearly a no-show, having abandoned Shinji years ago to pursue science. And his only sibling in combat is Rei, a near-mute with a total disregard for her own existence.

We see Shinji bond with Misato, with Rei; we see him begin the long process of self-discovery. He's introduced to several important revelations earlier on than before, motivating his actions more directly; an action which serves the audience as well, by setting up the umbrella conspiracies between Nerv and Seele. But more importantly, things don't go quite the same way we expect them to...and that peppering of novelty keeps this new *Evangelion* production fresh and exciting.

Evangelion 1.0 comes out via Funimation in November, but is already showing (thanks to Funi's dedication) in movie theaters around the country. Older anime fans may remember the VHS releases by ADV, the DVD re-releases, or the late (and somewhat disappointing)



release of *The End of Evangelion* by Manga Entertainment.

Now, I would argue that it was the popularity of *Evangelion*, coupled with the broad appeal of Pokémon, which gave the West a new fondness for anime in the late 90s through the early 2000s. And though there are many factors as to why that market crashed, I suggest here that the core of that collapse was due to the quality of anime which followed *Evangelion*. So few Japanese companies answered Anno's call to action. So, ADV is gone. Geneon no longer publishes. Central Park Media is a memory.

Funimation is one of the last bastions of Western Anime licensing.

Whether they are still releasing anime in fifteen years, I suppose, will depend in some part on whether Hideaki Anno achieves his end. Whether he can connect today's exhausted Japanese animation industry to the future. It depends on whether we can, or can (not), advance. [play](#)

parting shot

Perfection, plus. *Evangelion* is The BBC Office is Star Wars is Monet is Bob Dylan.

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Sgt. Frog

Season 1 / Part 1

Like a VH1 reality show, only funny, and without the STDs

words Dave Halverson

Go ahead, laugh it up you pitiful Pokopenian; Sgt. Frog may look like a cross between Kermit and a Teletubby, but when it comes to Japanese TV shows based on freakishly transmogrified articulate quadrupeds bent on world domination, *Keroro Gunso* (Sgt. Frog to you and me) is in a class by itself.

I got hooked on Sgt. Frog reading the shiny TokyoPop manga, thinking there wasn't a frog's chance in Hades that it would get picked up here (alien space frogs bent on enslaving humanity and collecting Gundam Model Kits? Not a chance yo!). So when ADV snatched it up for their 2007 lineup (that never lined up) I closed the book and decided to wait, and wait, and wait... Following the great anime calamity of 2006, brought to you by over saturation and your local neighborhood anime pirates, FUNimation finally stepped up and began the arduous process of localizing and casting a show starring alien frogs, neurotic teenagers, a pilfering parent, and a full-floating apparition. But that's all behind me now; for I have looked upon its folly and realized I stopped maturing at approximately age 14.

The lead alien frog person thing, Keroro (Sgt. Frog) is the Commander of the Advanced Recon Mission Preparatory Invasion Terraplatoon (whose acronym is unfortunate), sent to establish a good landing place for the impending invasion and enslavement of the human race by planet Keron's two-foot tall frog people. Things go awry however when the Sgt. decides to hide out at the Hinata household, and is discovered when Natsumi

(13—which in anime years makes her a hot 16-year-old) wakes up her brother Fuyuki (12—which in anime years makes him a 9-year-old dunderhead) from a bad dream about...you got it—an alien frog invasion and before you can say “Pokopenian” (the Keron word for humans), Sgt. Frog is dangling from the ceiling undergoing a battery of questions you'd expect a 12-year-old nerd and his psycho 13-year-old sister would ask a squat bulbous headed talking frog alien in a hat...until they realize they're late for school, steal his top-secret weapon (one Kero Ball) and decide to pick things up later. Not a great day for the A.R.M.P.I.T.... Not only has the Sgt. been incapacitated and separated from his four-frog team—that's a big mission not accomplished right there—but it's adios invasion when Fuyuki inadvertently hits the panic button on the Kero Ball and sends the mothership back to Keron.

Stranded, along with his four displaced Terraplatoon-mates, whom we begin to meet in this very volume, Keroro's only choice is to make nice with the Pokopenians and wait for the next opportunity to enslave mankind. If only he could keep his mind off of cow flesh (that's one serious meat fetish for a frog), Gundam models, and an unnatural attraction to the vacuum cleaner... although given the amount of housework Natsumi has him doing, it kinda does make sense. Only the ghost of the tormented girl living in his room that's really an old bomb shelter built on top of a

cemetery which is possibly built over a dark cavern that leads to the underworld, knows for sure.

In conclusion: Left with the choice of enslaving humanity or fixing up his basement abode (the Kero Ball only has enough charge for one or the other) the sarge doesn't stop at the cheap Scandinavian furniture...Sgt. Frog's got more pop-culture puns, parodies and references than a Buffy the Vampire Slayer Star Trek Roast hosted by The Simpsons. What's not to love about a McDonald's worshipping, vacuum cleaner doting, skirt sucking, genitalia-less alien frog creature with an appreciation for fast internet connection, HD channels and fine Japanese collectibles? We could hang. [play](#)

Locked, loaded, and ready to enslave humanity.



parting shot

The best alien frog invasion series to come out of Japan, ever!! Doesn't your family deserve the best? Don't you?

Released by: FUNimation Studio: Marvelous Entertainment Rating: TV-MA Running Time: 315 mins. Available: Now

Gunslinger Girl - II Teatrino

The Complete Series

Gunplay as Art

Gunslinger Girl was one of those anime that stuck with you for a long time...got under your skin, if you will, in the same way that all good art does. It's probably a stretch to compare, say, Michelangelo's *David* with an anime about secret cybernetic government assassins. And who happen to be little girls. But art is art, no matter the form, and *Gunslinger Girl*'s impact went far beyond its sci-fi/anime trappings and into the realm of aesthetics and beauty. The sequel, *II Teatrino*, doesn't approach the technical mastery of the first series (the animation, in particular, has taken a huge hit), but still manages to pack a lot of emotional punch.

The uninitiated would do well to track down a copy of the first 12 episodes, which remain the true masterpiece. The Social Welfare Agency, as it is euphemistically called by the Italian government, uses high technology to rescue terminally ill young girls and give them new cybernetic bodies. Being saved from death has its price, as the girls become assassins, complete with Bourne-style psychological conditioning, weapons training, and a handler assigned particularly to them. These teams, known as *fratello*, then eliminate targets determined dangerous to the state. As in the first series, *II Teatrino* fully comprehends the atrocity of turning an innocent little girl into a

compulsive killer, but unlike the first doesn't quite milk it for all it's worth.

This being fictionalized Italy, mafia-type enemies can be found behind every tree, but the chief antagonist of *II Teatrino* is a separatist group known as the Five Republics Faction (FRF). Central to this story are Triela, the best of the cyborg girls whose brittle psyche can't handle failure, and an assassin for the FRF known ironically as Pinocchio, a young man who manages to beat Triela in combat and shares many of the same qualities. The action of the plot serves as a background on which to paint a series of interconnected stories about the price of revenge, what it means to be human, and the responsibility of a parent.

Heavy sounding stuff, I know. Don't worry—*II Teatrino* at its heart is a fast-paced action-spy movie, but with lyrical qualities. But just like the first go 'round, *II Teatrino* takes just enough time to pause to think about the implications of its subject matter—so much the better. While it may not be *David*, or even the first GG, it's certainly well-executed art, despite a reduction in animation quality and a more heavy-handed style. **Bill Gray**



Triela takes aim at her nemesis, Pinocchio.

parting shot

A solid sequel to the mastery of the first series, with a more focused story that comes at the expense of animation and character development.

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FORCE
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Spice and Wolf

A Wolf in No Clothing

words Bill Gray

I guess it shouldn't be surprising that a wolf doesn't wear any clothes, except for that profitable incident with the sheep. But still, it seems like Holo, the "wolf" of FUNimation's latest import *Spice and Wolf*, spends an inordinate amount of time in the first four episodes FUNi sent me clad in nothing but her bushy tail and birthday suit. Not that there's anything wrong with that. If you focus on the (tastefully done) nudity, however, you'll miss out on an elegant, fascinating story with two immensely likeable characters at its heart.

Her penchant for going *au naturale* aside, Holo's one sharp wolf. When she abruptly appears in the back of traveling merchant Kraft Lawrence's cart during a pagan festival honoring

Her penchant for going *au naturale* aside, Holo's one sharp wolf.

a "wolf goddess," he's not quite sure what to make of her. He quickly comes to believe that she really is the incarnation of a local wolf deity, who had been bound to the fields by a promise made hundreds of years ago to the founders of the village. Although Holo's kept up her end of the bargain, the villagers recently have turned to more "modern" methods of ensuring a good harvest, leaving her feeling unwanted and unnecessary. So, she makes a bargain with Lawrence to take her back to her country in the far north.

For his part, Lawrence ends up with a traveling companion who's arrogant, quirky, touchy, and ruled by her appetites. She also possesses a keen nose for business (literally) and helps Lawrence improve his trading as they make their way north. Holo's quite a character—immensely proud that she's a wolf and not a human, but also surprisingly fragile at times. You get the sense that Lawrence's solid, dependable nature makes him the perfect partner for her, and indeed, as the show moved along, it seemed to be heading that direction, until a dangerous business deal sends the series careening in a different direction.

Based on these first few episodes, it's safe to conclude that *Spice and Wolf* has the potential

to be one of FUNi's best releases this year, along with *Baccano!* and *Sgt. Frog*. The animation's sumptuous, with lush shots of the pastoral countryside and late medieval architecture, and the medieval madrigals and instrumentation complement the scenery and provide some of the most unusual background music I've heard in an anime in a long time. The offbeat nature of the show, with its focus on trading and relationships, held real appeal for me, and Holo's a character you won't soon forget. However, I wish the show took a little more time to establish Holo's background, as well as how and why she was stuck with the village in the first place. As it is, the first few episodes move along at a tremendous clip that will leave viewers struggling a bit to keep up. Still, if worst comes to worst, there's always the lowest common denominator of focusing on Holo's mostly naked form. You pervert. [play](#)

parting shot

Unusual and quirky, *Spice and Wolf* has serious potential—assuming people don't get too distracted by Holo's birthday suit.

Released by: Right Stuf Rating: 15+ Running Time: 600 mins. Available: Now

The Third: The Girl With the Blue Eye

Complete DVD Collection

Third Eye Not Blind

If you were to read *The Third*'s "back of the box" you'd get the impression that it's about some badass anime chick for hire and her smart-aleck A.I. tank—kickin' butt and monster bugs... Not that it's entirely misguided, but it certainly sells the contents short. *The Third* is a lot of things; it has a solid sci-fi core by way of the actual Third—a superior three-eyed master race that lords over what's left of humanity after "A Great War"—and there's definitely some giant-bug elimination and sword-and-gun-play going on (Honoka is the "Sword Dancer" after all), but the best thing about *The Third* is what happens in between what's expected.

Honoka is clearly special given her extraordinary fighting skills and compassionate nature, although her third eye suggests a link to The Third, whom she obviously despises. The bond between her and Bogie, her tank's A.I. system, is another unexpectedly profound arc, as is the series' reverence for the desert itself. Her on-again, off-again relationship with Iks is obviously headed somewhere too. Similar to an open-world game, *The Third* takes its time unfurling as the main story thread emerges between various missions, although I'm never in a hurry for the next reveal. I actually enjoy the melancholy of *The Third* more

I enjoy the melancholy of *The Third* more than anything.

than anything; the moments of reflection when Honoka is at odds with her place in the world or when the narrator pays homage to a desert sky or recites an impromptu soliloquy... It's a rare anime that stops to smell the roses. Nice box too—cool art and pencil boards and real DVD cases stuffed with full color booklets containing concept art, bios, and liner notes. It's the Right Stuf. **Dave Halverson**

parting shot

Great story, thoughtfully written with zero cliché and one seriously awesome Tank. Worth some sand in your boots.



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YOU SHOULD BE WATCHING FUNIMATION.COM/SGTFROG

Fullmetal Alchemist Brotherhood

Sibling Revivalry.

words Heather Anne Campbell

At first glance, *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* is a redundancy. A show that retells the story of Edward and Alphonse Elric, the two young boys who spend their days trying to erase the scars of their alchemical original sin, seems unnecessary given the satisfying conclusion of the original series.

Sometimes, though, things are richer than they appear.

Brotherhood doesn't pick up where *Fullmetal Alchemist* ended. Instead, it branches off in a different direction, following the manga more closely than the original series in both plot and tone. The result, if you're familiar with the 2005 show, is a necessary evil of several recap episodes, followed by an explosive and original story that's packed with new drama and new surprises. Airing weekly on Funimation's website, with a DVD (and perhaps Blu-Ray) release to follow, the new *Fullmetal Alchemist* series would be easy to dismiss ... if it weren't for the enthusiasm of those who've made it

past the first twelve or thirteen episodes of *Brotherhood*.

That's why I'm here. I'm evangelizing, my brothers. *Fullmetal Alchemist* is very much worth watching, but it takes a heavy dose of medicine before you get to the good stuff. But what good stuff it is.

By the time the show reaches episode nineteen, we've forgotten the old story of how Homunculus are crafted, or the details of the brothers' attempt to bring their mother back to life. We've forgiven *Brotherhood* for retelling the outline of the original show, because it expands on its set of rules and ideas in a different way. If you've read the comic, you probably already prefer this new *Fullmetal Alchemist*. If you haven't read it, trust it.

If you've never given *Fullmetal* a shot, now's a great time to start. Edward Elric and his brother Alphonse are alchemists in a world very similar to our own. Similar in all ways but one: the existence of real, scientifically formulated, alchemy. The rule governing alchemy is simple: Equivalent Exchange. Everything in the world can be made out of its individual elements, save for one item: Human beings.

When the Elrics' mother dies, the two boys break the taboo against human transmutation, and attempt to revive their mother by combining the elements of human composition -- only to discover that people are made of things intangible. The ensuing chain reaction claims the younger brother's entire body, while simultaneously feasting on the older brother's limb. In an act of desperation, Edward fuses his younger brother's soul to a suit of armor,



If you've read the comic, you probably already prefer this new *Fullmetal Alchemist*.

and soon after, the two set out on a journey of penance and hope. Their goal: To reclaim what has been lost. Their original bodies.

Fullmetal Alchemist is good anime. It does what anime does best, mixing melodrama, fantasy, and comedy into one delicious soup. It's worth watching ...

... Even if you think you've already seen it. [play](#)



parting shot

Though slow to start, *Brotherhood* picks up and takes off, leaving your memories of the original series in the attic.

For an appetizer, try the FMA OVA.



now reading



Neon Genesis Evangelion The Shinji Ikari Raising Project

Re-imagining the Reincarnation

With a twisting, confusing canon; a remarkably dense and incomprehensible story; and some of the most unlikeable characters ever to grace anime; the success of Neon Genesis Evangelion is nothing short of remarkable. Hideki Anno's masterpiece will undergo a major re-imagining in the coming months with the release of Evangelion 1.0: You are (Not) Alone. In conjunction, Dark Horse has tapped into the resurgence of all things Eva with their latest manga, The Shinji Ikari Raising Project.

Loosely based on one of the scenarios presented to Shinji at the end of the original Evangelion series, the manga postulates a world where Shinji's mother was an active part of his life, where Shinji and Asuka were raised together, and where mysterious Rei Ayanami is...still mysterious. Seeing familiar faces in a new, gentler setting was a true pleasure—it surprised me how much I still care about these characters. Perhaps, despite all of its incomprehensibility, *that* is the true genius of Anno's Evangelion. **Bill Gray**



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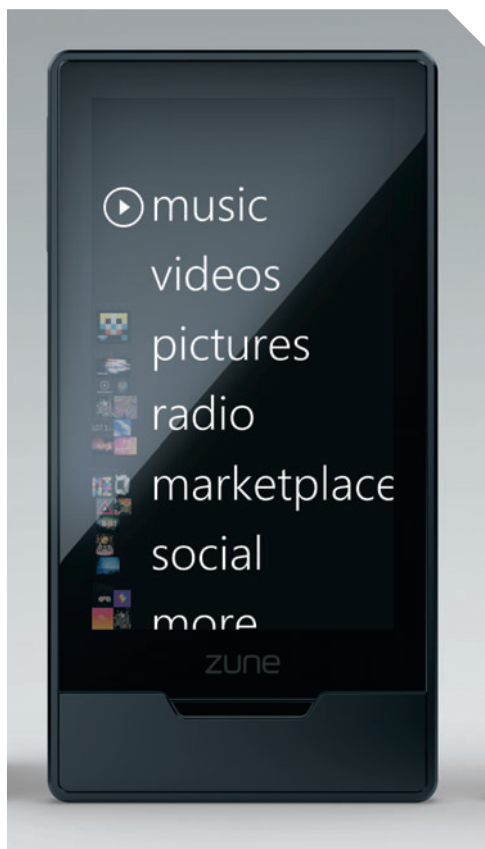
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Microsoft Zune HD

Starting at \$219.99 - www.zune.net

Available in sexy Black (16GB) or lustrous Platinum (32GB), Microsoft's Zune HD is the Dom Pérignon of the portable digital media player world. Featuring a gorgeous 3.3" multi-touch OLED screen that's as smooth as silk, a 16:9 (480x272 resolution) widescreen display and the ability to output supported video files to an HD TV in glorious 720p, it's just like having your own pocket-sized HD DVR...well sort of. And aside from boasting all of the fantastic features of its predecessors, the Zune HD just so happens to be the first portable media device to feature a built-in HD Radio™ receiver. Hear a song on HD Radio that you want to add to your music collection...? Well now you can now tag songs for purchase later, or use the built-in wireless feature to download new music directly to your Zune HD from the Zune Marketplace. Oh and did I mention the integrated full screen internet browser? Oh technology, how I love thee.



The TuneBoard

\$70 - www.verbatim.com

Verbatim, the venerable maker of computer storage media, has recently started to branch out into a wider computer peripherals market, and its hardware is surprisingly innovative and well-built. Verbatim's latest PC and Mac keyboard is the TuneBoard, also known as a Speaker Keyboard.

The TuneBoard is an attractive, solidly built keyboard with very nice blue backlighting for its keys. Once you've used a backlit keyboard for any stretch of time, it's hard to go back to your shadowy old keyboard. The TuneBoard has a nice black glossy trim (beware, greasy fingers!) that compliments the backlighting well in dimly-lit rooms. The back of the keyboard can be raised with convenient, separate settings, helping to level the slanted rear face of the device towards the user, where they can operate sound and music controls for apps like iTunes and, of course, listen to those built-in speakers.

Before we discuss sound quality, there's the question: Why would you need speakers in a keyboard? A surprising number of computer users settle for the weak sound of their monitor's built-in speakers. For others, it's about economy of space: they don't have room to install a full desktop sound system. The TuneBoard represents a quick and compact audio solution, seamlessly installed and activated via USB.

Perfect for music and videos in dorms and small offices, the TuneBoard's two integrated satellite speakers, while losing some of the highs, demonstrate surprising accuracy, bass and power. And while most serious PC gamers will use high-quality headphones (especially for location-critical shooters), we were surprised to discover the TuneBoard really isn't too shabby in that department either: thanks to excellent stereo separation and ideal placement, those mission-critical sound effects are spatially correct when the TuneBoard pipes them out. This sturdy, space-saving keyboard goes for about \$70 at all major retailers.



The Nano Mouse

\$30 - www.verbatim.com

Any notebook user seeking a high quality compact wireless mouse should look no further than Verbatim's Nano optical series. Available in black, red, green, purple, yellow, pink and blue flavors, this excellent little mouse is all about comfort and cosmetics. Essential grip zones around the lower half of device feature a comfortable rubberized surface, and the button array feels responsive and robust; the Nano will survive those rocky trips to the bottom of a carry-on bag.

The Nano's 2.4 GHz wireless receiver is about the size of a dime, high-invisible on the surface of one's laptop, and when you bring it on the road there's a convenient storage slot for the receiver built right into the bottom of the mouse—so they never have to be separated. The Nano is a reliable, compact notebook mouse that will set you a back a reasonable \$30.



The Force Unleashed Starkiller and Evil Apprentice Mini Busts Two-Pack

\$99.99 - www.shopafx.com

How many times have you found yourself thinking that your Star Wars collection, like your Jedi training, feels incomplete...that it's missing something, but you can't quite seem to put your finger on it? Well now you can breathe a sigh of relief and perhaps even attain Jedi nirvana with the exclusive Force Unleashed mini bust two-pack from Gentle Giant and Action Figure Xpress (AFX). Featuring Darth Vader's secret apprentice as both the Ultimate Jedi and the Ultimate Sith, these highly detailed mini busts are limited to a mere 2000 pieces. So head on over to AFX today before Order 66 is executed and these beauties disappear like Boba Fett into the belly of the Sarlacc.



025
插翅虎 雷橫
MIGHTY RAY



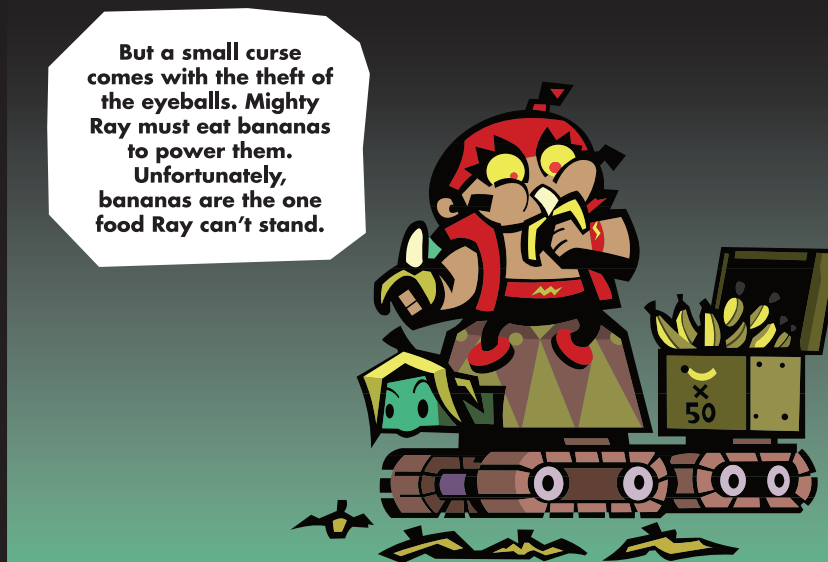
Now Mighty Ray
uses his electric
eyeballs to defeat
his enemies.



First Squad's Hero,
Mighty Ray, was not
always a mighty
warrior. When he
joined Big Green, he
was a brash and
impulsive teen and
rushed into a fight
with the evil Zebra
Brothers without
preparing.

He lost the battle
and his eyesight.

Most of the Heroes were disappointed in Mighty Ray, but their
leader ApeTrully believed that with training, he would become
one of Big Green's most powerful assets. So, he took the boy
on a dangerous journey — to steal the magic golden eyeballs
from the remains of the Monkey God Warrior.



But a small curse
comes with the theft of
the eyeballs. Mighty
Ray must eat bananas
to power them.
Unfortunately,
bananas are the one
food Ray can't stand.

The Haunted World of El Superbeasto

Studio: Anchor Bay Available: Sept 22

Starring the voices of Tom Papa, Paul Giamatti, Sheri Moon Zombie, Rosario Dawson

words Dave Halverson

Anime notwithstanding, quality feature-length adult-oriented animated features (meaning anything with nipples) went extinct in 1997 when Ralph Bakshi called it quits after the HBO anthology, *Spicy City*—the first animated TV-series aimed at “adults” (it had nipples). HBO ordered a second season on the heels of descent reviews; The Dallas Morning News said it “exploits the female form,” so mission accomplished; but when RB wouldn’t ditch his writers in favor of “professional LA screenwriters,” HBO pulled the plug.

Besides the magnificent animated tales Mr. Bakshi brought us such as *Wizards*, *American Pop*, and *Fire and Ice*, before the glare of CGI rendered traditional animation obsolete, a pair of Heavy Metal movies based on the time-honored adult-illustrated fantasy magazine (currently under the care of TMNT co-creator Kevin Eastman) and a spattering of mature toons such as Peter Chung’s *Aeon Flux* and HBO’s *Spawn* animated series are all we have to show for nearly a century of animation leading up to the computer culture that’s slowly sucking the humanity out of popular culture.

Going into to Comic Con 2006, if you’d have asked me which was more likely—Clay Aiken opening for GWAR or a traditionally animated monster-sex-action-comedy from Rob Zombie?—I’d have gone with the American that’s now idle all the way.

This being my first traditionally animated R-rated monster-sex-action-comedy (widdled down from the original XXX version), I’ll begin with the animation itself. Like all modern day animation, *El Superbeasto* was animated in Korea, which can be a good thing or a bad thing depending on the animation director and myriad other factors that have to happen here for it to gel there, such as storyboards, sequence direction, and of course the first rule of great animation—great character design. Ah, something the internet is actually good for! You can Google Chris Battle and judge for yourself, but I’m all-in on this guy. Quality animation and direction, heavy retro stylization and homage course through every immoral, depraved, oversexed minute of *El Superbeasto*; it’s like a threesome between a Disney feature, porn, and a Spumco cartoon.

Animated entirely on location in Monster land, El Superbeasto—played with braggadocios dynamism by Tom Papa—is an ex big-time luchador C-list celebrity with an A-list ego, even though he can currently be seen in either a shampoo commercial, hawking his crank call CD, *Beasto Crankies Vol.8*, or in Big Spicy Meatball Macho Man where our story begins. After a rigorous casting session, it’s showtime as Beasto saucers up his “actress,” adds the cheese, and then tosses her like a pizza before they’re joined by a co-worker and embark on a very well animated cartoon threesome, until the full moon turns the girls turn into monsters, leaving him no choice but to administer bloody death by sex toy and ceiling fan. Meanwhile, as Beasto heads to the titty bar to unwind, his sister/sidekick, the bubbly, boobalicious bad-ass Suzi-X (brought to huggable life by Sheri Moon Zombie) commences operation Iron Eagle, infiltrating Nazi zombie HQ to steal Hitler’s head (alive and not kicking in a jar) with a little help from her robot pal Murray

who can transform into all sorts of, er, fun vehicles. The ensuing zombie biker chase/big-brawl-style blood bath is in a word, unhinged. But the fun is just beginning.

Cue one of the greatest actors of our time (says me) Paul Giamatti as Doctor Satan, the textbook high-school loser nerd gone stark-raving out of his zitty gourd. To complete his transformation from goober to ultimate hell beast, he need only find and wed the woman with the devil’s mark, and then transmogrify his unholy bride via

backside meat pole ride to gain the powers of hell!

Enter (and what an entrance) the sultry, sexy, foul-mouthed white trash gangsta ho, Velvet Von Black; and her decidedly animated cartoon co-stars. If you thought Rosario Dawson was awesome before, and you better wait until you get a load of her dark side...who knew?

I feel good this month. I’m playing a Heavy Metal video game opus (with Rob Zombie on my playlist) and Rosario Dawson and Paul Giamatti are about to consummate unholy matrimony in a Rob Zombie animated film...To me, these things are like the plant in *Wall-E*. I can hardly wait for *El Superbeasto* in The Man with the Golden Thunderballs [play](#)



BACK OF THE BOOK

Blah, blah, blah

10_09 GREG ORLANDO

HOW QUICKLY THEY FORGET

All I ever learned from video games, with apologies to author Robert Fulghum, I learned was stupid.

Do not misconstrue. Video games teach us much about camaraderie, persistence, the importance of the Power Glove, and the nutritional value of the common Cheez Doodle. There are also lessons to be learned about physics, history, human physiology and, of course, interpersonal relations, but only for the really, really stupid.

The entirety of my knowledge about Germany, for example, has been culled from video entertainments such as Castle Wolfenstein and, to a lesser extent, Call of Duty. The Germans are a proud people, I've noted, who existed roughly from 1939 to 1945. They spent most of their time screaming "achtung!" (German for "I am running in front of your guns now!"), invading Poland, and running in front of other people's guns. Because they spent so much time running in front of other people's guns, the Germans are mostly dead now. The remaining Germans now live in gigantic castles and spend their time trying to resurrect their leader Adolf Hitler or, at bare minimum, to find a way to recover his brain so as to use it to power some sort of gigantic killer robot. They're so busy, in fact, they have very little time to charge into other people's guns.

My study of both archaeology and anthropology has been greatly advanced by video games, too. I now know that all ancient cultures were populated by people so stupid they created doors that could only be opened if someone shoved a series of huge and hugely heavy stone monoliths onto a series of preset locations, or aligned a series of mirrors so that laser beams could be directed onto a final obelisk which would then reveal whatever it was they wanted to conceal. And, after building all this ridiculous shit, they either fatally burned themselves with lasers trying to get to the bathroom, or died from the exhaustion, commonly brought on by shoving excessively weighty stone blocks.

These awesomely retarded people left us their blocks and mirrored panels, and they us an enduring legacy, by which it is meant their barrels and crates. These ancient peoples were big on hiding their stuff in barrels and crates. You name it, these ancient folk kept it in barrels and crates: treasures, food, weapons, ammunition, the latest issues of Block-Heaving Quarterly... And, of course, not willing to smash open the containers they'd made, these people learned to live without the food, weapons, ammunition, etc., they so desperately needed for survival. They're all dead now, and how could anyone have ever predicted their demise?

The practical lessons from video games should enable me to become a modern-day Hippocrates. Now if we could only get the high-minded, brainiac

"scienticians" to crack open, say, a Dynamite Cop or a Final Fight, the advancements in medical health would come like bullets from a machine gun. It has been proven, time and again, that a gravely wounded man, mere seconds from death, can be suitably revived—nay!—rejuvenated by eating a ham, pork bun, or giant piece of meat right off the bone. Even this may prove unnecessary, as recent shooter-type games have illustrated that rapid healing may be facilitated simply by hiding behind huge stone blocks (and again such blocks prove their infinite usefulness) and remaining still for five or so seconds.

Now there is some hotly contested debate over this matter, with one school championing food as the ultimate restorative and others suggesting that standing still after serious injury is sufficient for any grievous injury. Time will indeed tell which of these philosophies prevails but, to be frank, there's a lot of delightful meats and pastries that are going uneaten. This may prove not only criminal, but detrimental to the public health, if our meaning is plainly understood.

Personally, I can see a future where men on the battlefield of tomorrow are wheeled into triage for treatment. Amid the blood and screams, a corps of highly trained doctors will preside, ready to ply their knowledge in order to save lives with maximum efficiency and minimal cost. "Nurse! This man has 27 bullet wounds! Get him 125 CCs of cake, stat!" or "He's lost a lot of blood! We're going to need an extra big ham shank for this one." I foresee this future to not only be kind to our proud soldiers, but also extremely delicious.

The Nintendo Wii has taught the masses that pressing buttons is stupid. This lesson has yet to sink in, but it begins and ends with the notion that game players are fat and lazy and should be doing something instead of doing something while resting their fat asses on a couch. Sword-swinging characters demand to be controlled with flailing motions. Football stars can only be directed with pretend lobs of non-existent pigskin. And, of course, certain Raving Rabbids from a game that will remain anonymous to protect the guilty, may only perform their sinful business with a motion that, should it ever be replicated, will cause shame, blindness, or shameful blindness.

Punching people in order to make them spit coins has proved a spectacular failure, but I may just be punching the wrong people. It is thus impossible to fault video games for this. I hope someday to collect enough baubles to be able to buy something spectacular, but in the meantime, I've been unable to find the cats amid the huge piles of junk. And god help me, I'd really, really like to leave the house and get some Cheez Doodles, but I forgot that I hid the Red Skull Key in the basement. By which I mean the dungeon.



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FORZA.XBOX.COM



XBOX
LIVE

Microsoft
game studios



Forza Motorsport 3® is only available on Xbox 360®. Offer available while supplies last, at participating retailers. *Requires access to Xbox LIVE.



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AVAILABLE 10.27.09

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Jump in.

THIS IS NOT JUST ABOUT POINT A *to* POINT B THIS IS FOR ALL THINGS 4-WHEELED *and* FAST

IT'S FOR THE RACERS, TUNERS, *and* DRIFTERS THE PAINTERS, DESIGNERS, *and* THE DREAMERS

BECAUSE THIS IS MORE *than* PIXELS AND POLYGONS THIS IS ALUMINUM AND CARBON FIBER

THIS IS NOT A SIMULATION

IT'S AN *invitation.*



FORZA MOTORSPORT 3

WHERE DREAMS ARE DRIVEN

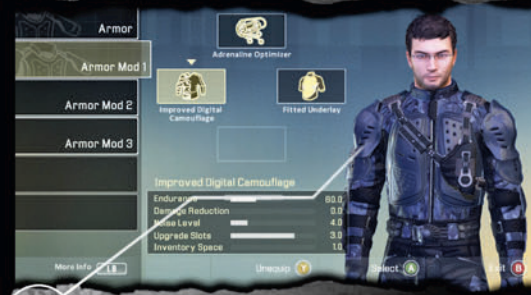
"EVERY EVENT STARTED WITH *THEIR* CHOICES. THEY ENDED WITH MINE."



DECIDE HOW THE STORY PLAYS OUT
BASED ON THE CHOICES THAT YOU MAKE.



EMPLOY METHODS OF STEALTH, TRICKERY,
HUMOR, TECHNICAL APTITUDE, SABOTAGE,
FIREPOWER, AND MANY MORE.



COMMAND SKILLS LIKE CLOSE-COMBAT
TECHNIQUES, LETHAL WEAPONS MASTERY,
& THE USE OF INGENUOUS SPY GADGETS.

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XBOX
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Drug Reference
Intense Violence
Sexual Content
Strong Language



PS3™



PlayStation Network

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play

**Bonus
Digital
Content**















bonus

Divinity 2 - Ego Draconis

System: Xbox 360, Windows Developer: Larian Studios Publisher: DTP Entertainment Available: Nov 2009





bonus

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bonus









